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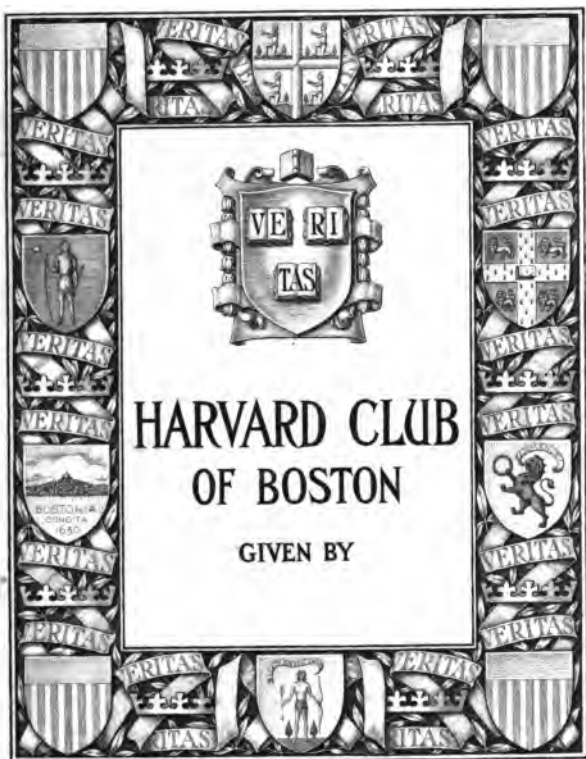
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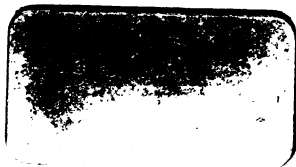
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THE STRANGER AT THE HEARTH



THE STRANGER AT THE HEARTH

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KATHARINE METCALF ROOF



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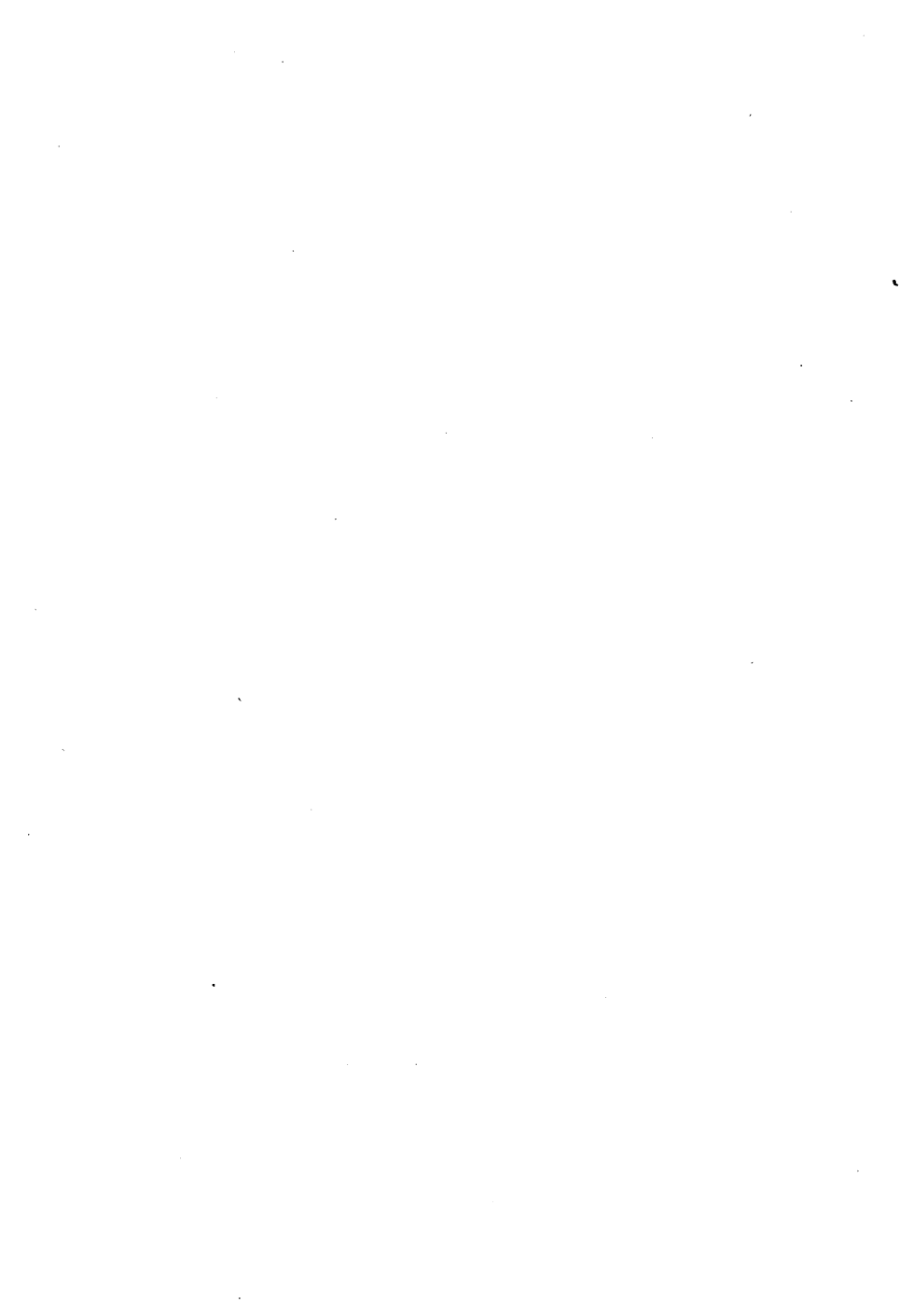
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**TO
MURIEL
ITS FIRST FRIEND**



THE STRANGER AT THE HEARTH

THE STRANGER AT THE HEARTH

CHAPTER I

"And this is America!" apostrophized the count. He glowered upon the unlovely panorama of the crowded thoroughfare with the immediate emotional appraisal of the Latin, and found it odious. "*Bella America* — America the free!"

The progress of their car along the choked Avenue, alternating between a funereal slowness and a projectile-like violence, the Avenue itself with its angular jumble of overgrown buildings, dissimilar yet monotonous, as though some Titanic child had inconsequently built them, the sharp shafts of sunlight upon dull colors, the whirl of dust and loose papers,—all these unfamiliar sights and sensations had combined to upset the delicate equilibrium of the count's patience. The chauffeur, treating his cab with the muscular indifference of the public manipulator, had several times almost flung them from their seats in halting his car. This undignified experience was new and displeasing to the Italian gentleman, bred to the formalities and graces.

"*Bella America!*" The count almost sang the syl-

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bles. His tragic scorn seemed indeed operative—"The sky—where is it?" He unfolded his arms to indicate with gesture,—“Nowhere so far away as in this your America!”

The contessa, regarding both her husband and the congested human spectacle with her amused detachment, answered, rather it seemed because of her consciousness of the ill effects of silence upon the Italian temperament than from any belated desire to interpret her native land:

“New York, as I have remarked before, is not America, Mario. Not all of America is crowded and ugly. If you were to see the wide free spaces of the prairie, for instance —”

Mario made a gesture of dismissal. “I don’t want to see them.”

“Neither do I,” his wife promptly soothed him. “So let them stay there, please. They don’t really do us any harm.”

Mario would not smile.

“But the dear North Shore rocks, I must see them! *You* don’t have to come if you don’t want to but I have to smell that New England sea again.”

Mario refused to accept the New England sea.

The chauffeur, looking backward preparatory to turning into the side street, presented to their contemplation a face otherwise vacuous, strained to a concentration almost savage upon the process of mastication. Mario regarded him with infinite disgust. “He seems to be eating something.”

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"No," Nina explained regretfully, "not eating. It is, I am afraid, Mario — gum."

"Gum!" Her husband turned a face of forbidding gloom upon her. His mystification seemed too incurious to invite elucidation, yet the countess explained.

"Chewing-gum. The innocent, offensive vice of the lower classes in America. But how incredible that public servants should be allowed to indulge in it! Actually the boy that opens the door at the hotel was doing it."

"The same boy who discusses the weather with me without waiting for me to discover him, I suppose."

"I am afraid several of them will do that. But a gum-chewing attendant in a good hotel! Once that would have been impossible here."

"America!" intoned the count lugubriously. "America the free!"

His wife laughed. "Really, Mario, you speak as if I had abducted you. You know you wanted to come and you don't have to stay!"

The cloud on Mario's brow lifted slightly at the suggestion contained in her words, but descended again as, in obedience to the traffic policeman's signal, the chauffeur abruptly halted his car.

"*Imbecille!*" exclaimed the outraged count.

But his wife was watching the enforcement of municipal law with amused interest. "Note the majesty of that raised hand, Mario! There is the true royalty for you! Nothing that I have seen of kings and queens can better it. Recall the futile gesture of the little Paris

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gendarme who bids them to stop and they go on!"

"They *arrive*," Mario responded almost viciously. "They do not first stand still, then fall in a heap, all the way to their destination!"

But the contessa unsympathetically continued to be entertained by the spectacle.

The policeman conducting the chaos of the traffic as though it had been a Strauss symphony, pantomimically indicated his will, alternately restraining and accelerating rhythm and tempo, drawing in at their appointed time the different themes from side street or Avenue; now powerfully commanding the *forte* of concerted automobiles, now reassuringly coaxing in the piano of fluttered feminine foot passengers at the cross walk.

"Nice big Irishman!" Nina apostrophized the blue bulk of the King of the Highway, almost affectionately. "It's rather good to see one again. Behold my ideal man, Mario, strong yet gentle! See him protect the wavering old lady and the lawless little gamin. No wonder the nursemaids fall in love with them!"

But Mario would not smile. New York, the heterogeneous and congested, was on his nerves, and he arrived at the Loring's discreet entrance in a side street east of the Avenue, with tragedy written upon his brow.

The chauffeur, his passionate preoccupation with his gum temporarily interrupted by the stronger passion for the tip, watched anxiously while the count found an extra quarter, then pocketing it with a grunt heaved himself into his cab and noisily wheeled himself away.

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"A lira and a quarter for having one's neck dislocated and no thanks! He would have been grateful for five cents in Europe."

"Judging from his accent Europe is obviously where he came from, so don't hold me responsible, Mario, if he has forgotten his manners in America."

Nina Varesca glanced at the red brick and stone entrance to her cousin's house. "They were just beginning to build these when I left. The dear hideous old brown-stone fronts have almost disappeared."

"At least do not regret the loss of ugliness!" the count didactically adjured her, as they entered.

Mrs. Loring's Irish maid could not pronounce the Italian name and frowned resentfully at being called upon to attempt it. The countess took out cards as a solution of the difficulty. The count complained as he followed his wife into the Adam reception room. "The American servants are not clever, my dear."

"There are no American servants."

"What then? She spoke a kind of English but she didn't understand yours. Has it then become contaminated in Italy?"

"It wasn't my English, but her Irish."

The count threw up his hands. "Yet another nationality! A Greek waiter, French head-waiter, an Italian bell-boy, a Jewish telephone girl, a Swedish chambermaid, an Armenian porter and a German hotel clerk! Are there any Americans employed in America?"

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Nina laughed. "Apparently not many in New York. But the Irish are an established part of our American life, you know."

"And once you were angry because I said an Italian was the first American," the count recalled.

The maid returned with a message: "Mrs. Loring will see you upstairs in the library."

The room into which the Count and Countess Varesca were ushered was a library in fact as well as name. The walls were surrounded with shelves filled with richly bound books, evidently new, in harmonious tones of leather. On the walls were casts of the Parthenon frieze and framed brown prints, chiefly Madonnas by Raphael, Murillo and Andrea del Sarto. There were also some reproductions of Sir Frederick Leighton, Watts and Burne-Jones. "The Philistines' complete art gallery," was Nina's comment.

Mario Varesca glanced about with the quick, superficial, entirely personal curiosity of the Italian. "A gentleman of irreproachable and obvious tastes. But why all these books? Does anyone read them?" Then his eyes rested upon the lower part of a row of shelves closed with a latticed door with something of the amusement of a naughty gamin. "That closed lattice over there, *carissima*, you see —" He rose, crossed the room and tried the knob. "I knew it was locked. When I look at these walls I feel sure that there is a pile of naughty French novels behind that little door!" Mario's

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mood of gloom had passed. America's shortcomings were for the moment forgotten.

Nina laughed. "*Cativo*," she said as to a child, "I am ashamed of you. There are unworldly souls in America of a kind undreamed of in your cynical Latin philosophy."

"So you tell me, Ninina." The count remained inconsequentially unconvinced.

The contessa considered the room — a type of which no counterpart could have been found in an Italian home. "I begin to realize the years! To think of little Mildred married to a famous American author!"

"And you to an infamous Italian count," her husband concluded. He gave his small moustache an upward twist and glanced at himself in the mirror over the mantel.

"Mildred is two years younger than I. That made me feel ever so much older, of course, when we were children." Nina Varesca rose and crossed the room to examine an unfamiliar Tanagra surmounting a bookshelf. Her husband's eyes followed her. A woman of intangible quality, she suggested neither race nor type. Subtly and sensitively wrought as one of the women of the Cinque Cento, the soft leisurely quality of her adopted country seemed superimposed upon, without effacing, the inherent American vitality,— a thing so different from the vivacity of the Latin. As she spoke, little lights of expression played over her surface, touch-

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ing the eyelids, the brow, the corners of the mouth. Yet the eyes veiled thought and feeling, and the warm lines of the mouth were disciplined by experience from the original temperament of youth. A woman, one would say, incapable of self-betrayal, a fine, inscrutable product of civilization, yet potent to move and hold in thrall the imagination of man.

Varesca, however, was an Italian. Eight years of matrimony had left him free to enjoy the less subtle charms of other women, even though it had not dulled his appreciation of his wife as an art object and valued chattel, envied, admired and desired by other men. There were moments when some conspicuous case of infatuation, however obviously hopeless, roused to a sudden flaming consciousness the Latin's intensely personal sense of possession. Yet time had convinced him — as nearly as such conviction is possible to an Italian — that he need not distrust his wife.

Nina turned from the Tanagra — it was a French reproduction not especially well chosen. "Mildred — I hear her coming!" She moved toward the door. The two women met on the threshold.

Mildred Loring, the wife of the novelist, was a slender pretty girl with a round forehead like a child's. Her eyebrows, sharply penciled over serious, dark eyes, inclined with an angle downward toward the nose. The mouth was curved and modeled on generous lines, but it was not mobile and, except for a certain drooping suggestion of sentimentality, had the same childlike character

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as the forehead. She embraced her cousin with the impulsive warmth of a schoolgirl, then holding her at arm's length, scrutinized her with affectionate curiosity.

"You haven't changed much, I should have known you."

"And you," Nina returned, "haven't changed at all — has she, Mario?"

The count bent low over Mildred's hand. "It is true. The signora is as when we saw her eight years ago at our wedding."

Nina studied her cousin's unwritten face. "You don't look a bit married. How do you manage it?"

Mildred blushed. "I haven't been married very long, you know — only a year and three months."

Nina exclaimed in mock dismay. "And I am an old married woman with two children!"

"Oh, I *do* so want to see them!" Mildred exclaimed. They were seated on the divan now, hand in hand. Mario sat opposite watching them with amusement, for the comradelike friendship of women as it exists in Anglo-Saxon countries is unknown among his countrywomen.

"Are they both with you?" Mildred asked.

"Paolo is with me. I left Mario with his grandmother and an American governess. He is rather young to travel."

"And are they as beautiful as their pictures?" Mildred asked.

Nina's subtle smile became suddenly simple. "Don't

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ask their mother. To me they are so beautiful that I can't believe they are mine."

Varesca smiled. "That, *carissima*, is the explanation."

Mildred regarded him solemnly with her large eyes. "How nice to have a husband who says things like that! Percy does sometimes, but he is so scrupulous; he can never say anything that is not the exact, absolute truth."

An expression banished before it became a smile crossed Mario Varesca's face.

Nina lightly explained. "Isn't that just one of the racial differences? Mario probably means the same thing as an American husband when he tells his wife that she looks like the devil in that gown. But it is only when he is angry —" she included him with a glance — "that he tells me the unflattering truth. I am afraid I prefer the Italian way myself. But perhaps that is because I am used to it."

Mildred looked down, her dark lashes as conspicuously curling as those of a doll rested upon her cheek. Her cousin's manner and words bewildered her. Something about them did not feel quite right. It was too — light, somehow. Nina had not been like that when she left America at fifteen. She had seemed different, Mildred recalled, after her four years at a French school — but not like this.

Mario, like a true Latin, considering himself a connoisseur of feminine beauty, wondered why, with her clear skin, regular features and fine eyes, Mildred did

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not attract him. "She is beautiful, I admit," he said afterwards to his wife, "only somehow one does not care whether she is or not." His quick glance traveled from Mildred to his wife and he knew in spite of the fact that by the Italian's standard she was no longer young — for she was thirty, although she looked several years younger — she was more attractive than when a Signorina Americana with eyes that baffled him with their mockeries, their withdrawals, their disconcerting Anglo-Saxon directness, she had drawn him after her the length and breadth of Europe without pausing to inquire the extent of her portion. Complacent as he was in his Latin formula of woman, there were moments still when he wondered if he had plumbed the uncertain depths of those eyes.

"It is so lovely to have you here," Mildred exclaimed. Her conscience smote her lest her momentary qualm of disapproval had revealed itself. "I was so surprised when I got your letter. It came yesterday, I think — no, I believe it was the day before, because I remember Percy said that it was too bad I hadn't known in time to meet you and the boat came in Tuesday, didn't it? And then we went right to the hotel and you were out."

Nina did not assist these conscientious reminiscences.

"We came very suddenly on account of Aunt Lucia's will and I had other business matters to attend to. I have neglected my affairs over here so long. I should have cabled but I wanted to surprise you."

Mildred, watching her cousin while she talked, frankly

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searched for the explanation of that unfamiliarity in her face.

"You look so much the same I don't understand why you seem so different," she declared at last.

Nina laughed. "What a cryptic utterance! What dark meanings does it conceal, I wonder!"

Mildred continued her serious scrutiny. "I think you are prettier — that is, I mean more interesting looking — than ever. Of course I don't mean that you aren't pretty —"

Nina laughed and patted her hand. "Don't apologize. I make no pretensions to beauty."

Mario Varesca leaning back negligently regarded his wife. "They are not necessary. Nina is known to be the most beautiful as well as the most fascinating woman in Italy.

Nina lifted her eyebrows. "Why not include all the Americas since you are giving compliments upon the grand scale, Mario!"

"I am not competent to speak of the women of America."

"Not yet, dear, but you will be."

Mario pulled deprecatingly at his moustache as if unable to deny his sad doggishness. Mildred looked from one to the other, her lips a trifle apart. She felt as if she were listening to a foreign tongue. The sense of doubt, of potential disapproval, came over her again.

"How long are you going to stay?" she asked gravely.

"Probably a month," Nina replied, "so we will have

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plenty of time to bridge over the lost years. How have we managed to miss seeing each other all this time!"

Mario, divining with his quick Latin perception that the two women wanted to talk alone, rose, giving the excuse of an errand in connection with some missing trunks.

"Nina has always told me how much better you manage the affair of your luggage over here," he remarked, "but I find you can make mistakes even in America."

"Oh, we are not perfect," Mildred assured him earnestly. "But can't you telephone? Must you really go yourself?"

Mario laughed. "If you could only urge that more convincingly!"

Mildred looked embarrassed. "Really I wish you wouldn't go."

The count laughed. "A personal interview is best. I saw an office of the company on one of the avenues we passed. I leave you to your confidences." He made a gesture and kissed her hand — an act that evidently somewhat startled Mildred, bowed low and took his leave, promising to return in half an hour.

When they were alone Mildred felt more at ease. She drew Nina's hand against her cheek. "Dear Nina. It is so good to see you — and looking so happy! I think Mario is the handsomest man I have ever seen."

"Please don't tell me that he looks as if he had stepped out of a Giorgione! Three of our fellow countrywomen said that on the way over."

"Giorgione? I don't think I know his work so well."

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Nina glanced at the Murillos and understood. "And you are just as much in love as ever!" Mildred ardently rhapsodized her cousin's romantic matrimonial adventure which had, indeed, greatly occupied her dreams before they were preoccupied with her own love story. "What rapturous letters you used to write!"

"I was a romantic little goose, wasn't I?" Nina's eyes were filled with reminiscent amusement.

Mildred raised startled eyes to her cousin's face.

"Surely—" her tone revealed a gathering distress—"you don't mean that you feel differently *now* . . . that you have—in any way—been disappointed in your husband? You don't mean that, Nina?"

"I mean that I have been married eight years, Milly. Remember I spent my growing-up period in a French school, and heard much more about men—and knew less—than an American girl brought up here."

Mildred still looked disturbed. "But you don't mean that you have—" she paused and finished in the low tone of one touching tragedy—"lost your ideal of him?"

Nina's smile was quickly suppressed. "I am devoted to Mario. But I no longer imagine him to be the hero of the letters. He is a charming person but, I am glad to say, not perfect."

Mildred Loring gazed ecstatically into space. "Percy is," she said softly.

"Oh, I shall be afraid of him!"

Mildred, not responsive to her cousin's lightness, answered solemnly. "I was at first. I still am sometimes."

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Nina glanced at Mildred's rapt face. "I can see that you are very happy," she said. "Dear, dear little Mildred. You are so real and you take life so seriously. I couldn't bear to have you anything but happy."

Mildred turned upon her wonderingly. "Don't *you* take life seriously, Nina?"

"I am afraid I do sometimes."

Mildred's eyes became sombre. "If you were as happy as I am you couldn't say cynical things like that!"

Nina laughed. "Do I sound cynical? I don't feel so. Don't let's talk about me. I want to hear everything about you."

Mildred leaned forward, her great eyes fixed. "*Happy!* I am so happy that sometimes it frightens me. You will understand when you see Percy."

"Tell me about it." Nina's voice had the caressing inflection of her adopted country.

Mildred seemed to relive her past as she intensely reviewed it. "You know I wrote you those long letters at the time — how I had always hated all the men in our set. They never talked about anything but material things, horses, sports and the stock market. They hadn't any ideals — or if they had they didn't talk about them. Sometimes it almost seemed to me that they hadn't any souls, if such a thing could be. And mamma was so cross with me because I wouldn't marry that silly Willy Price who was always laughing at everything. She called me an old maid. You know I was nearly twenty-seven when I met Percy. Then one night papa asked

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him to dinner — I shall never forget it. I had read his 'Home of the Heart' and 'The Silver Cloud' and all the others a dozen times — you know them, of course."

"I knew his name. I am afraid I haven't read them. I don't seem to see the American novels," Nina explained.

"I thought I had sent you a set."

"I never received it. The post and express companies are temperamentally conducted in Italy, you know."

"You must take one back with you." Mildred returned to her recital. "At first I was terribly afraid of Percy. When he spoke to me I couldn't say a word. Oh, Nina, it was the most wonderful experience — to have a man really love you just for your soul! I couldn't believe it when he told me at the end of the winter and asked me if I would do him the honor to be his wife."

"It doesn't sound very much in the modern American manner," Nina commented.

"There is nothing modern about Percy — in the sense, I mean, that modern things are trivial. He despises anything trivial. He is, of course, an intellectual giant, far above ordinary men, but beyond and more than that he stands to me as the highest type of American gentleman. He says that is his ideal. His ideals are so fine and high that they almost frighten me. But he tells me I must not worship him as something he is not."

Nina patted the hand she held. "Dear little Mildred, you always were a hero-worshipper."

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"At last I have found a hero worthy of my worship," Mildred declared.

"I remember you used to expend it on actors and opera singers," Nina recalled. "They were all super-men and women to you."

Mildred's face contracted. "Don't remind me of that. Don't mention those men in the same breath with him." She broke off, listening intently. "I believe that's Percy now." She rose, excusing herself. Nina heard her talking with someone in a low voice in the hall. In a moment she returned with a radiant face. "It *was* Percy. Isn't it lovely! I was *so* afraid he wouldn't get back before you left. I never know when he is coming. When he gets an idea he just walks and walks until it is 'out,' as he expresses it."

The door opened and Percy Loring entered. Nina glancing at him saw that he was not young, but very straight, very tall and partially bald; further than that she observed that he had large eyes and a small mouth partly covered by a moustache. He came to meet her with stiff, unhurried movements.

Mildred fluttered about, supplicating him with adoring glances. "Percy dear; this is Nina, my cousin Nina."

Percy Loring extended his hand. "Have I really at last the privilege of beholding the celebrated Nina?" His voice was small and rather high and he spoke with an English accent that would not have deceived the moderately acute ear into belief in its authenticity.

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"Celebrated! For what!" The countess lifted a faintly inquiring eyebrow.

Percy Loring gave her a close glance. "I will tell you some time." His manner was pompously mischievous.

"How mysterious!" Nina turned to her cousin. "What dreadful tales have you been telling of my past, Mildred?"

The author's expression became almost roguish, if such an adjective could be applied to one so ministerial. "It wasn't Mildred. It was Fair Randolph—and the Wortley school-boys that you met one day on Fifth Avenue.—Ah, I see you begin to remember."

Nina smiled. "Could I ever forget! The little blue flannel petticoat I dropped just as they passed. And I tried to stuff it into Fair's pocket and she wouldn't forgive me for a month. Oh, those tragedies of childhood!"

For a full moment Percy Loring, as if transfixed, kept a steady gaze upon the contessa's face, then suddenly suppressed a laugh like a cough almost in the falsetto register. But the next instant his manner became that of the good man covering, since he could not condone, the risqué story.

"Yes—er—a—that was the incident. Nina—I may call you Nina, may I not?"

"Of course, why not?" Nina spoke carelessly; "knowing you through Mildred's letters I always think of you as Percy."

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Mildred was giving instructions to the servant who entered just then with the tea. Percy looked down at his wife's cousin. "Continue to think of me that way." He seemed gently to give permission.

Mildred joined them, laying an affectionate hand upon Nina's arm. "I hope no one will come." But even as she spoke the street door below opened and closed again. "May I say I am not at home, Percy, if it is anyone but the count?" she pleaded.

Percy considered gravely. "Not at home is of course an understood fiction of social intercourse. You know, my dear, I have no objection to your saying that upon occasion, provided it is not a mere selfish whim."

"I can't imagine Mildred the victim of a selfish whim, unless she is greatly altered," said Nina.

"Mildred is unselfish," her husband recorded in the manner of one dealing out careful justice.

Varesca re-entered, smiling. "Was I right to come up unannounced?"

"Quite right," Mildred assured him with her pretty invariable smile. "You are at home here—" a statement that brought some faint passing expression to the count's face. She presented him to her husband and, seating herself at the tea-table, conscientiously attended the wants of her guests, interrupting their anecdotes as they approached climax to offer cakes and toast and inquire whether their tea was quite right. She noted with surprise that Mario refused tea but ate cakes with the unction of a small boy. Percy Loring watched him

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closely, addressing him with studious politeness when he spoke. Mildred studied him intensely with an interest increased by her conversation with Nina,—an interest primarily based upon her youthful affection for her cousin; yet Mildred was wont to proclaim that she enjoyed nothing more than “character study.” Varesca did not observe them at all, having made up his mind about them both in his first glance, and having no further interest in them.

The conversation with the arrival of the two men became perfunctory and had it not been for the light ease of the contessa, might have developed that inexplicable element of discomfort that arises with incongruous social associations. After a time Varesca glanced significantly at his wife.

“Do not forget, *tesora mia*, that we have an early dinner engagement. You know we go to the opera to-night.”

Nina rose in quick response. “That is true. I had forgotten. It is ‘Tosca’ with Caruso and Destinn; we mustn’t be late. Unless you have designs upon another cake, Mario—you are looking at them so affectionately—we should go this minute.”

Percy Loring ceremoniously craved permission to call a taxi and, receiving it, solemnly rang for Delia to carry out the order. “You are staying at the Waltham,” Percy observed in the interval of waiting. “Then indeed you are living *a la princesse*.”

“*A la princesse parvenu*,” laughed the countess.

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"Really I can't believe that our big hotels were always so *gauche* and glittering."

"I am afraid our contessa is difficult." Percy plainly disapproved of unkindly criticism.

"You must come again to-morrow, Nina dear," Mildred urged her. "I have Second Sundays." There was always something suggestive of graduation day festivities about Mildred's attitude as hostess.

Nina patted her. "I would rather come when I don't have to share you with a crowd."

"It won't be a crowd. You must come. Don't you want to meet our friends, Nina?"

"Of course." Nina saw that Mildred was preparing to be hurt. "I will come early and stay late," she promised with the smile that Mildred remembered.

Delia—she who had ungracefully admitted them—announced the arrival of their cab, and Percy Loring escorted them downstairs to the door where he shook hands with them both,—the count first, very formally, with Nina last, a cordial pressure accompanied by an earnest glance.

He returned to his wife and stood at the window thoughtfully caressing his moustache. Mildred hovered about him reverently. Ordinarily she did not question until it was his will to express himself, but this time she was unable to restrain herself.

"You like Nina, do you not, Percy dear? Don't you think she is dear and sweet?" She waited anxiously for his endorsement.

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"She is very charming," Percy replied with measured approval,— "an accomplished woman of the world."

Mildred's face clouded. "Oh, do you think she is worldly, Percy? Indeed she isn't, you are mistaken."

"I didn't say that. I said that she was a woman of the world." Percy's tone held the punctilious precision of the purist.

"But you like her?"

"My dear child, I have not had a dozen words with her! But her husband"—Percy Loring's face darkened with disapproval—"must offend any refined taste."

"Why, I thought his manner quite charming," Mildred put forward her opposing impression timidly.

"I wasn't speaking of his manners." Percy regretfully shook his head. "I am afraid our cousin has made a very unfortunate choice."

"I think she seems happy," Mildred protested. "What didn't you like about him?"

"Oh, why—it is easy to see that he is dissipated, worthless, effete." Percy pushed out his lips on the consonants of the last words. "See as little of him as possible, Mildred."

Mildred acquiesced at once. "Yes, dear, as you wish, of course." She knew that Percy must be right, but her heart sank with apprehension for the future of the lovable cousin she had not always understood, but who had been like her sister in the childhood that seemed still so near to her.

"What," Nina inquired of her husband, as they set-

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tled themselves in the cab that Percy had provided, "do you think of Mildred's husband?"

Varesca smiled. "That there are naughty books behind the locked lattice!"

CHAPTER II

In response to Mildred's especial request to come early, Nina went alone on Sunday, Varesca having promised to follow later. She found Mildred and her husband in the library as before.

"We just gather around the tea-table in here on my days, unless there is a crowd," Mildred explained. "It is so much cosier than the drawing-room. And people always like to see the place where Percy works."

Nina glanced around. "It doesn't look as if anyone ever worked here, yet"—she considered the fastidious author—"one couldn't picture Mr. Loring in the midst of the supposed literary disorder."

"*Mr. Loring*," Percy chided her gently.

Nina, receiving this cousinly reproach with a vaguely smiling glance, noted again that odd, old-young effect the author had. His dark hair, worn rather long, was brushed from the side to the crown of his head in the attempt to conceal an encroaching baldness. He suggested somehow, in spite of his scrupulously correct afternoon dress, an earlier, more deliberate age. It was the type revealed in the photographs of the seventies, Nina reflected. After all, Percy must have been a well grown youth then! Properly placed, no doubt that was where

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he belonged. Now that she thought of it, he was essentially Victorian — rustically Victorian. There was no tinge of urban ease or cosmopolitan inconsequence about him. His large eyes had the self-conscious beauty of the village belle. And yet a certain pompous gravity he had led the ingenuous or idealistic admirer to characterize him as “distinguished.”

“What a joy to have you all to ourselves!” Mildred’s soft eyes looked all the affectionate things that her trite little habits of speech failed to express. But almost immediately following upon her words, came the sound of approaching footsteps, and Percy exclaimed, “Alas, the intruder!”

Following Delia’s announcement, “Miss Worthing,” a fragile-looking woman with a thin face, plainly, almost shabbily dressed, appeared in the door, then started back in some evident embarrassment. Mildred went forward quickly to greet her.

“Why, Jane, dear, what a nice surprise! It is ages since I have seen you.”

But her guest did not seem reassured. “I think the maid has made a mistake. I asked to see Mr. Loring. I only came on business. I supposed she was showing me into some room where he sees people.”

Mildred looked surprised. “This is his library. This is my day. I suppose she thought —”

A little slow always at readjustments, Mildred hesitated. “You — you just came to see him?” She voiced her hurt friendliness baldly like a careless débu-

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tante, but Mildred's directness was not the kind that has its roots in thoughtlessness.

Jane Worthing replied with recovered composure. "Yes, it was imperative or I should not have had to come on Sunday. Something about the illustrations for 'The White Flower.' There has been some mistake at the lithographer's —"

Mildred with a lightened face interrupted. "Oh, are *you* doing them, Janie? How lovely! Percy never told me. Surely you can sit down just a minute." She turned her guest so that she faced the corner where Nina stood talking with Percy. "Guess who that is over there? You haven't seen her for fifteen years, have you?"

"Nina!" Jane Worthing exclaimed, then made a sharper movement to withdraw.

"But I can't stop to see anyone to-day, Mildred, I — I only came on business."

But Mildred, disregarding her, called out to her husband and cousin who were standing before the bookshelves, "Nina, Percy — here is Jane Worthing." Nina turned quickly, Percy with something more than his usual deliberation.

Nina Varesca, with a delighted exclamation, came up and took Jane Worthing's hands in hers. "Why, Janie, how lovely to see you again! I should have known you anywhere — the same eyes. Do you still draw pictures on the margins of your books?"

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"No," Mildred answered for her, "she draws them for the books now. She is an illustrator."

"I so seldom see the American books and magazines," Nina quickly explained, "you must pardon my ignorance."

"I am sure there is no reason why my fame should have reached across seas," Jane Worthing replied, with a flitting smile — peculiarly sad, Nina noted. All this time Percy Loring had been, as it were, delaying himself in the background. Mildred's direct address of necessity drew him forth.

"Percy dear, I think you know my old friend Jane Worthing, although I didn't realize it. She has come to see about the pictures for 'The White Flower.' I didn't know she was illustrating it. Why didn't you tell me?"

Percy came forward very slowly, bowing formally and unsmilingly to Jane Worthing. "I don't always mention uninteresting business matters to you, my dear," he replied.

Nina Varesca gave him a quick glance. "Janie dear, it is *so* good to see you," she said again. The author, hearing, turned large questioning eyes upon her. The maid came in with the tea-tray and Mildred took her seat at the table saying,

"Come over here and have the first cup of tea, Janie."

"No, thank you, Mildred," Jane again began to refuse, but Nina interposed quickly:

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"Let me take the tea-table a little while, Mildred. Jane, you must stay for a little talk with me after all these years before you begin on your tiresome business." Then as she saw that the other woman still hesitated, she urged with her caressing note, "You don't want to hurt my feelings,—making me feel that my old friends have forgotten me."

"You don't understand," Jane hesitated, but she let herself be drawn toward the tea-table where Nina seated herself. Percy Loring drew his wife aside and they were as if alone.

Jane sat down, but provisionally. "You see, I am quite out of your world now, Nina." She stated it quietly.

"I don't know what you mean." Nina lightly refused to accept it, whatever it might be. "My old friends are never out of my world."

"Mr. Loring will, I fancy, make it quite clear presently." Jane put it a little dryly. "Meantime you are very good to look at, Nina. You always were, but like a true art object you have toned with time."

While Jane was speaking Percy Loring at the further corner of the room was addressing his wife in the tone of the censor.

"How did it happen that that woman got in here?"

Mildred looked frightened. "Why, Percy, she is an old school friend of ours. I have not seen her lately or you would have known that."

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Percy's expression was peculiar. "Excellent reason why you have not seen her."

"What do you mean?"

"In effect — that she is not a proper person for you to know."

"Percy!" Mildred exclaimed in shocked consternation. "You must be mistaken, surely. You must have confused her with someone else. Janie was the sweetest, finest —"

Percy Loring bent a stern look upon his wife. "I have not 'confused' her, as you express it, with someone else."

Agitated Mildred apologized. "Forgive me, dear but anyone can get mixed up about names, don't you think so?"

Percy compressed his small mouth. "Well, there is no mistake in this case. Jane Worthing, the illustrator. I was very much annoyed with Creston for giving her the contract for my book. I would have forbidden it if I had known in time. As it is I have requested that she use a pseudonym. We won't talk about it any more. It is a most unpleasant subject. I will see her in my den. Only she must not come here again, you must make her understand that, and you must get her out before any of our other friends come in."

Mildred, with a frankly distressed face, crossed slowly to the tea-table where Jane, under the spell of Nina's charm, had been drawn into interested conversation.

"Jane, Mr. Loring wants to see you downstairs in his

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den. He is afraid we won't give him a chance for the business talk here." Mildred spoke uncomfortably and with evident embarrassment, having slight skill in dissimulation.

Percy Loring addressed his attentions to Nina, drawing her from the tea-table, under the pretence, somewhat elaborately framed, of desiring her opinion of a picture. Jane faced Mildred frankly. "I can imagine what your husband was saying to you. That is why I didn't want to come in when I saw you all here." Her tone was cool and impersonal. "I had no intention of forcing myself upon you, Mildred, as I think you realize."

Mildred, painfully self-conscious under her old friend's calm explicitness, for the moment had no words, but almost immediately her warm heart, her old sense of friendship, overcame her scruples, even, for the moment her awe of her husband.

"Janie, don't speak like that. You didn't force yourself. I don't know what the trouble is, but I am awfully sorry." She put out her hand impulsively.

Jane Worthing took the hand, but her response was unemotional. "Thank you, Mildred. It is very kind of you, I appreciate your feeling but you may want to recall your sympathy when you know more about it. I shall not resent it. Women like you have to stand by the conventions. It is right that they should."

Mildred, her embarrassment increased by the other girl's strange speech, alarmed by the implications it contained which seemed, even to her immature understand-

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ing, to prove the justice of Percy's condemnation, cast an agonized glance in her husband's direction. Seeing him absorbed in conversation with her cousin, with her trained habit of not interrupting or disturbing him, she felt obliged to let him choose his own time. She turned to Jane with lowered eyes. "Tell me about the pictures for 'The White Flower,' Janie. I am crazy to know what parts you are going to illustrate."

At that moment Percy Loring, glancing coldly in Jane's direction, observed to Nina, "She should never have been let in—the Worthing woman. It is very embarrassing."

Nina's smile was unrevealing. "She is such a dear—so talented in so many ways and so modest about her gifts. She was a great favorite at school. Everyone loved Janie."

Percy Loring glanced at her sideways with a curious expression and cleared his throat. "As you are evidently unaware of her recent history, and seem to have acquired the—er—a—admirable foreign frankness of speech, I suppose I may speak to you as to one of my own sex? She has been living openly with a man to whom she was not married."

Nina Varesca glanced at the sad face of her old school friend, noting how worn and tired she looked. "Openly! Then she is courageous at least."

Percy Loring stared. His mouth actually remained ajar an instant. "*Courage*,—is that what you call it?"

"It takes courage certainly—for a woman."

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Percy Loring pulled at his moustache, "Contessa, really —"

"Do you know why they didn't marry?"

With an expression of distaste the author explained, "It is said that he had an insane wife and couldn't afford a divorce. I don't know really. He was dying of consumption and wasn't able to do much work."

"Ah," the contessa exclaimed softly in a tone that puzzled Percy Loring, "he was poor then — poor and dying —"

Percy's tone quickened. "He was a free-lance writer of some sort who had earned a good deal in his time, a profligate Irishman, who had nothing left to live on when he had to stop work." With the air of one withdrawing from an unsavory subject Percy broke off there.

The subtle brows of the countess contracted with some hurting thought. "And how did they live?"

The author's reply was contemptuous. "I believe she supported him. One only hears rumors, of course. Those things are so far from one's world." He was at a loss to explain the look that came into Nina Varesca's face.

"A woman to stand up like that alone against the whole of her world! And you don't call that courageous!"

Percy Loring considered her with a curiosity almost passionate. "Assuredly *not*, contessa."

"Think of all she has forfeited, and all that she must have suffered. Jane is a lady, not a drifting Bohemian

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art student, scarcely aware of the conventions she is violating."

"Immorality is immorality, contessa."

"I see; you are an unflinching moralist, Mr. Loring."

"I am, contessa, especially for women."

She smiled faintly. "Like most men."

Percy Loring gazed dreamily into space. "To me woman is something so wonderful, so ineffable, so fine, that the thought of the slightest smirch upon her white wings is torture to me."

"But for men — another standard?"

Percy's expression became one of austere nobility. "On the contrary. How dare we hope else to be worthy of the love of white-souled woman? 'We needs must love the highest when we see it.' Woman will always love the highest. It is her nature."

"I seem to recall some exceptions," Nina murmured.

"Ah, but they *were* the exceptions!" Percy Loring's face lighted. His manner was significant as though he had uttered something of deep import.

Nina's eyes, veiled, sphinx-like, rested briefly upon him. "You are fortunate to be able to live up to your ideals. Few of us do!"

Percy bent a beautiful smile upon her, "We can *try*!"

She started to return to the others. The author followed her, his eyes glittered with something unexpressed. "You seem to have imbibed continental ideas in place of our American ideals, contessa."

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"I suppose my Americanism has become somewhat modified."

He looked down into the eyes that were not for his sounding. "You hold some advanced theories certainly. *I* do not misunderstand you, but will you permit me to suggest that you should be careful about expressing such opinions generally? People might take you seriously."

"I am quite serious, I assure you."

Percy Loring gave her a long look. When he spoke it was with frequent swift glances at his wife, like one anticipating and guarding against observation. "We must talk more of these things," he began, "life, ideals—the eternal verities. Do you know you interest me exceedingly?" He evidently expected her to receive this tribute with surprised delight, but Nina walking away from him had already joined Mildred who was coming toward them.

"Percy," Mildred addressed her husband anxiously, "Jane wants to know if you can see her now." She had found it difficult to make impersonal conversation with her old friend after that first terrible moment of plain speaking. "She says it is rather imperative. Something about printers and lithographers who are waiting for your answer."

Percy replied with his studied politeness. "Certainly." He addressed Jane for the first time if obliquely. "My den is empty, I believe. I am sure Miss Worthing won't object to an informal reception."

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"Business appointments are not usually formal," said Jane Worthing, an answer which Percy mentally characterized as "brazen"—an adjective, by the way, which would never have been found within the carefully considered pages of his books.

Nina caught Jane Worthing's hand. "Don't go without giving me your address, Janie."

Jane hesitated, flushing slightly. "My address is in the telephone book," she said, as she turned to go.

At that moment two guests appeared at the door. Nina heard Mildred exclaim, "Oh, Fair, I am so glad —"

Fair Randolph, a radiant auburn-haired Southern girl, with large dark eyes, a trifle closely set, greeted Mildred effusively, recognizing Nina in the moment of introduction. "Why, if it isn't Nina Ferris! I saw in the paper that you were here! Seems to me you look just like you did before you were a countess." Then she held out her hand to Loring, introduced the stalwart young man who accompanied her, and passed on, apparently not having seen Jane Worthing.

Percy Loring, the smile with which he had greeted Miss Randolph fading, addressed Jane Worthing as an inferior. "This way, please, Miss Worthing." Having spoken, he preceded her out of the room and down the stairs.

"I thought she couldn't belong wid de guests," Delia Murphy recounted afterwards in the kitchen. "Look onct at the cloze she had on! — rainy daisies, they call

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'em. How are you goin' to tell anyhow wid de kind of lookin' people that comes here every onct in a while? One of 'em that I left in the hall wrote a big book Mis' Loring tole me but if they's ladies and gentlemen, w'y don't they dress like it?"

Thus Delia, true servant of Manhattan, voiced its standards in her own fashion.

CHAPTER III

Fairfax Randolph, with high soprano ejaculations, drew Nina to a sofa. Her escort, Willard Wright, found himself facing Mildred Loring at the tea table. He was a young man with fresh coloring, a large, good-natured mouth, a small nose and a voice imperfectly subdued to drawing-room uses. His manner was unembarrassed and natural and his clear, unobservant eyes showed the frankest admiration for Mildred's definite, regular prettiness.

"If I could just once tell you what I think of your husband's books, Mrs. Loring!" he exclaimed. His tones lingered on the *r* in a manner that, like his genial enthusiasm, proclaimed his habitat.

Mildred exclaimed with her soft eagerness, "*Please do* tell me! There is nothing I love to talk about so much."

Wright's young eyes deepened with naïve introspection. His habitually parted lips pouted portentously. He looked like an earnest child making a confidence. "I hardly know where to begin. Do you know he has had a tremendous influence on my life?"

Mildred received this intelligence with emotion. "So many people say that. But they are usually women.

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You have no idea how many letters Percy gets from them."

"I believe you. But his yarns aren't just women's stuff — with apologies to your sex — I mean it's the real thing — red corpuscles and all that."

Mildred's face was radiant. "Of course it is. And when the critics say horrid, bitter things — they don't often, but sometimes they do — and call it old maid's morality, it makes me furious. But Percy says he only feels sorry for them."

"More to be pitied than scorned, eh?" Willard Wright gave a robust laugh, but Mildred's face was intense.

"*Tell me how he influenced your life!*"

The boy met her serious eyes and glanced around the room. "Not now. Some other time when there isn't quite so much tea fight going on. Let me tell you about the time we had coming here. Miss Randolph played such a joke on poor Breck; did she tell you?" Mildred shook her head. "Say, she's a peach, isn't she? It seems almost a pity — I guess he's all right, only —"

Mildred glanced at the radiant Fair. "Percy says she sees him with the eyes of her soul," she said.

The boy's honest face held a shade of doubt. "It's a beautiful thought," he said. "I guess he always sees things in a kind of unworldly way, don't he?"

Mildred weighed this suggestion intensely, as if it were some subtle psychologic hypothesis, then nodded grave acceptance. "He is so unworldly," she said.

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Then with her attentive earnestness she urged him. "Tell me the joke."

Wright told her then, in his cheerful, trite, slangy fashion, how they had given Fairfax Randolph's fiancé "the slip," as he called it, but when he had concluded Mildred's serious eyes were still serious and a little puzzled. He began his diagram. "Why, it was like this, don't you see —" He went over the little anecdote, carefully emphasizing the points, and at the end was rewarded by her pretty, light laugh. He was not a critical lad. His synonym for the discriminations was "knocking." Mildred's soft eyes met his with admiration. His own sense of humor was of the sort that finds satisfaction in musical comedies and Sunday supplements. Even had it not been, his Western chivalry would have acquitted this pretty, cordial, feminine thing of her literalness and found her merely "refined."

Percy Loring, his uncongenial business interview over, strolled back to the library where the number of his guests had been augmented by several new arrivals in his absence. Mildred summoned him as he entered. "Percy dear, you must come here and meet one of your appreciators, Mr. Willard Wright. He is crazy to know you."

Loring acknowledged the introduction benevolently, his hand upon Wright's shoulder. "My dear boy, it makes me very happy to hear that." But his eyes wandered over the dear boy's shoulder to where the countess sat talking with Fair Randolph and Mrs.

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Montague Smith, the latest arrival, a pretty woman with prematurely white hair and a high color, who was always one of the first to capture the interesting social novelty.

"I want Mr. Wright to have a real talk with you," Mildred urged. Percy smiled absently.

"Presently. I will return for that pleasure. I must greet Miss Fair. I haven't had a word with her yet. She is looking very beautiful to-day." With an accentuation of benevolence in his smile the author excused himself and with a patronizing nod in passing for a slender, blonde girl in a dark blue suit who was attempting to carry on a conversation with a deaf old gentleman, he crossed the room to join the group of women. His attention was secured first by Mrs. Montague Smith, who temporarily sequestered him. The countess, who had noted the author's casual greeting and its recipient, questioned Fairfax Randolph.

"Who is the charming little girl talking to the old gentleman?"

"Which girl? Oh, that one in blue serge? Why—that is little Bertha Rennels." Fair's tone dropped to indifference with the recognition.

"Nancy Rennels' sister?" Nina exclaimed. "Why, of course; she looks like her. The baby! She was in pigtails when I left. What a charming face, but a little sad. What has become of Nancy?"

"Married an' gone to the Philippines. Lucky thing for her. You know they lost their money, their father committed suicide. Bertha has some kind of a maga-

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zine-writing position. You seldom see her anywhere any more. Ah reckon she can't afford cabs and clothes these days. Has a pretty good opinion of herself though. Doesn't seem to need sympathy."

Nina rose. "I am going to introduce myself to her."

Fair, amused, looked after her, humming softly to herself, a habit that with her invariably accompanied certain mental processes.

Percy stopped half way in his answer to Mrs. Montague Smith, a shade of annoyance crossing his face.

"What! is the fickle contessa deserting us?"

"Ah reckon she's had enough of me," was Fair's light response.

Mrs. Montague Smith exclaimed, with torrential appreciation, "What an adorable person, your contessa! What magnetism, what subtlety, what fascination, and withal how completely the grande dame!"

Percy turned to consider the subject of their attention, but some shift in the grouping of his guests temporarily hid her from sight, and he found himself meeting the full innocently admiring gaze of Willard Wright.

The great man smiled benevolently, with a stately half bow of recognition for the discriminating youth who, with a fresh access of interest, returned to the ever-congenial topic with his companion.

"He is an Englishman, isn't he? I thought he spoke like one."

"No, but his grandmother was a French Canadian." Mildred was never so radiant as when annotating and

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interpreting Percy. "He was born in Maine, but he has spent a great deal of time in France and England. I think Mr. Loring is very cosmopolitan in his culture, but very American in his ideals." This last sentence had somehow the ring of a quotation.

"Then he has French blood," Willard Wright reflected, deeply interested in all details concerning the object of his youthful idealism. "I thought there was something fawren about him. I suppose that accounts for his courtly manners."

"And his chivalrous attitude toward women!" added Mildred. She felt that Willard Wright was very congenial.

"Perhaps." Willard Wright for all his anxiety to coincide now seemed to feel a tinge of doubt. "I didn't think the Frenchies had much on us there. But I've never been in their country."

"Of course those things are Mr. Loring's natural character," Mildred explained. "But there is something very charming about the French manner, don't you think? And Mr. Loring has it."

"He sure has," the boy agreed cordially, "wherever he got it. Must say he don't seem much like the Canucks I've seen in Montreal, but maybe some of the prosperous citizens are different."

Mildred placidly traversed this biographical side path. "Yes, indeed, there are descendants of some very old French families in Quebec. I don't know whether they are prosperous or not. Many of the early settlers were

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chevaliers, you know. I think nothing is more romantic and picturesque than the history of French Canada. Mr. Loring and I have been re-reading it lately."

Mrs. Montague Smith, feeling drawn toward a new arrival at that moment, left her host, declaring that she must not be selfish and monopolize him. Percy, with an access of the courtly "fawren" manner, commented upon by his young admirer, bent his exclusive attention upon Fair Randolph.

"Do I see you without the thrice fortunate young man?"

Fair with her eyes upon the door returned, "Ah reckon that's he now."

As she spoke a young man entered. His shoulders were narrow and stooping, his features had a curious effect of incompleteness as if he had been forgotten half finished by His Maker. His dull gaze traveled over the room, scarcely brightening as it found the desired object.

His beautiful fiancée greeted him serenely. "Oh, there you are, Barry." Then with a slightly raised voice she added, "How did you happen to miss us?" She gave a significant glance at Wright, who returned an emphatically understanding smile.

"Don't know. I was there," Barret Breck replied heavily.

Percy Loring greeted his guest effusively, but his eyes glanced frequently in the direction of the contessa. She was still talking with Bertha Rennels. "I must rescue her," thought Percy. "I don't know what Mildred can

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be thinking of to leave her so long with that little nonentity."

As if clairvoyantly sensitive to his wishes at that very moment the devoted Mildred escorted Willard Wright to her cousin's side and having presented him, returned to her duties at the tea table.

Percy, the ever-punctilious host, noting that the boy seemed to have directed his first remark at Bertha Rennels, hastily excused himself to Breck, who was laboriously delivering himself of an opinion, and almost precipitately attached himself to the contessa's other side.

She did not reply at once to his ponderous pleasantry. He saw that her eyes were upon his late companion who, deserted by his host, had sought the side of his fiancée. For the moment revulsion was apparent upon the face that so seldom betrayed her thought.

"Surely that is not Fair's Mr. Breck," she exclaimed.

Percy's eyes followed her glance. "Yes, that is Barret Breck, son of Elias Breck, the oil man, you know. The daughter married a French nobleman, you may remember. A fine fellow." Percy benevolently considered the subject of his narrative. "A multi-millionaire, of course. Not personally well favored, perhaps, but a fine man. We set too much value upon the surface." As Nina made no response, he continued, "And he is winning a noble and beautiful girl, one of the rarest flowers of the garden of the South."

Nina's eyes rested upon Fair an instant. "A painted rose!" she murmured.

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The author glanced up uncertainly. "Eh?"

Nina's eyes returned to Barret Breck. He was smiling at some remark of Fair's, yet in this supposedly benign mood he was somehow infinitely less pleasing to contemplate.

"And you believe she loves him?" Her light inscrutable gaze rested briefly upon the face of the author which at that moment was wearing its most benignant expression.

"I am sure she honors him." Percy's tone was reproachful, but gently so. - As if anticipating some interpretation less elevated than his own, the author underlined his meaning. "She honors him for his qualities. It is hardly noble, surely, to judge a man by his face. It is only upon qualities of the soul that true love is founded."

"Then you believe that Fair loves Mr. Breck's soul?"

Percy's acquiescence was lofty. "I do." He caught some escaping light of expression on her face, and shook his head, lifting at the same time the roguish finger. "Ah — you are a confirmed cynic, contessa!"

The countess looked amused. "You see we are frank about our mercenary marriages in Italy," she said. "We are frank about many facts of life as you are not here. The nude does not shock us."

Mildred passing at that moment caught this last sentence and gave her cousin a startled glance.

"Oh, Mildred," Nina called softly, but Mildred without response passed on. Not infrequently, from over-

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conscientiousness rather than inattention, Mildred missed the quick verbal passage, so perhaps, intent upon her responsibilities as hostess, she had not heard her cousin address her. Yet her face was very grave.

"I am afraid you have shocked Mildred. She is not accustomed to the Continental broadness of speech," Percy remarked, but his wife having passed out of ear-shot his face relaxed into laughter. "I have to protect the plumage of my little white bird," he explained, "but you don't shock *me*, Nina."

"I see no reason why my remark should shock anyone."

Percy, not noticing the quality of her tone, interpreted himself more fully. "Really at heart, you know, I am thoroughly Continental in my point of view. That is to say — at least — not thoroughly; but — French blood, you know — I am not so puritanical as you might think."

"I had not thought."

Percy's smile showed his gratification. "I am glad you did not think me puritanical. I see we are going to understand each other. We shall get on famously, I see that."

He was bewildered to discover that the contessa had risen with the evident intention of leaving him, but finding her way temporarily blocked by a group that had formed before their corner, she stood waiting for an opening. To force a passage in the manner sometimes seen even in fashionable New York drawing-rooms would have been impossible to Nina Varesca.

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"Have I then no power to hold you longer!" Percy Loring apostrophized reproachfully.

The contessa, without responding to this touching appeal, permitted her eye to wander about the room.

"Who is the woman in purple talking to Mildred?" she inquired. "She looks French."

"French by marriage." Percy glanced an instant in the direction indicated. "She is a Greek, a delightful woman, an extraordinary mentality. It is Madame La Vallière, a friend of Mrs. Wilmot's. Mildred finds her very stimulating mentally."

The countess considered the mentally stimulating Greek briefly. She did not resemble any of the Greeks she had met. On the other hand she distinctly did suggest one of the most familiar, but by no means one of the most distinguished, French types. Her gaiety, if slightly mechanical, was pronounced, her manner positive, her voice high.

The countess turned from this animated picture to find the glittering eye of the author still upon her.

"I find so many attractive-looking, beautifully-gowned women in America," she said, "and I am sure there are many mentally stimulating, as you call it. I have been talking with the most enchanting little girl—" Percy looked politely interested, but his bland expression changed suddenly to a puzzled contraction of the brows as the contessa added the name,— "Bertha Rennels, a younger sister of one of my school friends."

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"Bertha Rennels," he seemed to ponder, dubious about the identity of his guest. "Ah, yes, I know of her as a young woman living, I believe, upon the outskirts of literature. Dear Mildred is very democratic socially." He had intended to say more, but his companion quickly forestalled him.

"The Rennels are one of the old New York families. If you had been a New Yorker, Mr. Loring, you would have known that. But what is perhaps more important, the girl has a delightful mind."

But Percy seemed to question the validity of that impression. "As to her cleverness I rather doubt the authenticity of her gifts, but she is at least a *respectable* young woman — unlike that unfortunate artist who has been permitted to illustrate my book."

The blockading group had parted, but the contessa did not at once avail herself of the opportunity for retreat. The author was congratulating himself upon having assisted her to a juster estimate of social and moral values when her belated answer startled him.

"I am wondering why you think it a finer thing for a woman to marry a man for his money, as Fair Randolph is doing, than for Jane Worthing to take care of a man she loved while he was dying just as she would have had it been possible for them to have a legal marriage."

"Really, contessa, you are quite too advanced. Remember you are speaking of a pure and beautiful girl, the daughter of one of the first families of the South."

"I see."

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"How can such a bewitching young woman cherish such revolutionary ideas in her charming head?"

"Really, Mr. Loring, you should translate your compliments into French. They would gain by translation." The countess took advantage of her opportunity now and started to cross the room, but the devoted author accompanied her.

"I see, you are becoming quite denationalized. I must lend you some of my books." He looked down at her.

"Your own or —" recalling Mario's wicked insinuation, she glanced half-unconsciously in the direction of the locked door of the bookcase — "or some of your favorite authors?"

Percy, although ordinarily strong rather than swift in his mental processes, caught the direction of her glance. The muscles of his face twitched. His attempt to be playful lacked something of lightness although he did not fail to raise the roguish finger. "Ah, you have been exploring!"

She looked at him curiously. "I am not in the habit of opening other people's closed doors, and I am sure you wouldn't have anything behind them that all the world might not benefit by reading."

Percy Loring's eyes glittered with a peculiar brightness. "Take care, contessa —" Attracted, irritated, he met her smile and felt suddenly balked and bewildered.

"You must lend me something you have written," she said.

The author's mood suddenly shifted. "May I bring

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them to-morrow at tea-time?" He put his question eagerly.

"Yes, do, if Mildred is free." She gave the permission carelessly and with it quite definitely taking leave of him, joined her cousin at the tea-table. "Can you drop in on me at tea time to-morrow, Milly? Mr. Loring seemed to think you could."

"I am afraid not to-morrow, Nina; it is my afternoon at the Red Cross—" Mildred was one of those who do not need a memorandum pad to remind them of their engagements—"perhaps the next day—but, my dear, you are not going. Don't you remember, Mario"—Mildred pronounced it a little flatly—"said he was coming for you?"

"Very likely he has forgotten that I am waiting by this time."

"I thought only literary husbands were like that."

"Apparently there are other ways of passing the time just as absorbing as literature."

Mildred's eyes searched her cousin's face anxiously.

Nina, both amused and touched at her naïveté, smiled. Mildred, wondering if the smile concealed a heart-break, dropped a detaining hand upon Nina's arm.

"I wish you would stay and pour for me. It is rather strenuous—taking care of both the tea-table and my guests."

"I have been wondering why you do it with all the ornamental girls in town to be called upon?"

Mildred dropped her eyes. "Percy likes to see me at

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the tea-table on these informal occasions. You know he has all the beautiful old-fashioned feeling about women and the home. But some days it really is a bit difficult."

"The most understanding men are apt to be impractical about our affairs, are they not? Of course I'll pour the tea."

As Nina was drawing off her gloves, Taylor Maddox, an art critic, came up to greet his hostess, adding a prompt request to be presented to the countess.

Maddox was a short man, with blunt regular features and quick inexpressive eyes. The son of a tradesman in a small Western town, he had profited by its excellent public school system to the extent of gaining some pre-digested text-book information on the subjects of art and literature. Disdaining the lucrative career of his father he had decided to become a *littérateur* and an art critic, and equipped with certain classifications and labels of the art world,—a qualification that with certain present-day products of American civilization passes as culture—he had moved through successive stages of evolution from the paper of what he called his "home town" to New York by way of Chicago. Some of his cocksureness and effervescent spirits had passed from him in the process, and he had acquired instead certain mannerisms borrowed from the celebrities he had interviewed—which he was likely to lose, like his broad *a* and carefully attenuated *r*, in moments of excitement. He had achieved his goal and was writing comments on the pic-

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ture exhibitions for a daily paper. These criticisms, picturesquely couched in the argot of the studios,—applied with doubtful exactness—caused him to pass as a singularly astute art critic in non-artistic circles. Born John Taylor, the Maddox was taken on in his “How-to-judge-a-picture” period. Appearing first as a middle name, John Maddox Taylor soon became J. Maddox Taylor, then, coincidently with his arrival in New York, was reversed into Taylor Maddox. As such was he known to fame.

Through his work he had acquaintance with many artists and writers, but to that circle composed of the newly-rich, intermingled and leavened with the older blood of Manhattan, which constitutes present day fashionable Society, he had been a stranger until the wife of the popular novelist, passionately grateful for an article that had found an analogy between the art of Percy Loring and that of Corot, had sent him a card for her Sundays soon after her introduction to him at a Varnishing day. This furnished the opening wedge.

The Lorings were not millionaires, to be sure, but Maddox, with the journalist’s propensity for data, was aware of Mrs. Loring’s social standing. The fact that she was a descendant of an historic Knickerbocker family did not seem of importance to him, except as an item for a possible personal article. But he knew that he might meet at her house, not only other people of her class, and members of the artistic set to which he already had access, but also not improbably, some of the owners of

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the mushroom palaces of Manhattan, monuments to the land of opportunity. In that class Maddox was profoundly, ingenuously, interested with the child-like interest of the American in the transitional social stage whose only perceived standard is the financial one.

Despite an exhilaration in his manner that kept the contessa in her less responsive mood, she found the journalist's conversation more entertaining than that of the great author, their host.

As for Maddox, he was surprised to find the contessa, on acquaintance, less remarkable than a popular actress he had just called upon, less remarkable indeed, to his perception than the radiant Miss Randolph, whose side he had left a little hastily in the hope of meeting the contessa. Aside from recognizing this titled person's clothes to be in some indescribable fashion, more "stylish" than those of the girls he had grown up with, Maddox was not able to discriminate her quality. He would have characterized his sisters Emmy and Belle as more "lively," and the actress and Miss Randolph as more striking. He would feel occasional twinges of discomfort in the presence of a woman like Nina Varesca which, with further association, might develop into an unanalyzed antagonism, but he would have had no name for the twinge. In America the gentle hallmarks of birth and breeding are seldom recognized as such by the outsider.

"Didn't I see Danny Griscom in the hall?" Maddox asked with his ease.

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"Oh, is he back?" exclaimed Mildred. The critic nodded.

"Back from Belgium—and won't talk about it."

"Daniel Griscom, the writer?" Nina Varesca asked the question a little quickly.

"Oh, yes, you know him, don't you?" Mildred recalled. "You met him in Switzerland. I had forgotten. He never speaks of you."

Nina laughed. "How unflattering!"

Maddox helped himself to salted almonds. "Or perhaps—significant." He glanced at the tall man standing reposefully in the doorway, shook his head and laughed.

"Curious chap, Danny Griscom—the man who never gets rattled, that's what they call him."

"Percy says he has great poise," Mildred quoted. Then seeing that the deaf old gentleman had fastened upon Griscom, she rose, leaving the tea table to her cousin, and went to her guest's rescue without waiting for his approach.

Nina Varesca, assuming with her grace the duties transferred to her, asked Maddox how he liked his tea. But Griscom, for the moment, had all Maddox' attention, which was more trained in observation than in the social habit, and he did not hear her question.

"Looks lazy, doesn't he, but he isn't."

Nina's eyes rested an instant upon the strong, clean-shaven face. "He looks as if he didn't waste force."

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"You've hit it!" Maddox exclaimed. "Never wastes a word or a movement — that's Danny Griscom. He always strolls around like that, they say, whether it is China, burning Pelée or what not. You know he served his time at Park Row, like the rest of us." The countess smiled, not understanding this last allusion.

Maddox continued: "When he was globe-trotting in China it happened to be war-time and he sent some stuff to our paper. The chief cried for more and lo! he became a war correspondent. Danny's father used to own our sheet, you know, so I suppose the Higher Journalism was in the blood. But he writes now for the *Leader* — you know, our big weekly. Did war stuff for it all last summer. He's published a volume of stories too — corking yarns, they are —" Maddox brought his reminiscent ramblings to an abrupt close. "But you know him — you know all these things."

She looked again at Daniel Griscom, feeling in his face as she had before strong, yet poised forces, — the man of extremes who could act without counting the cost, and the man of justice who must hold at whatever personal loss to his conviction of right.

"No, I don't know them," she said. "Tell me. I never could get him to talk about his work. I didn't even know that he had written a book."

"That's Danny," asserted Maddox, who would never have dreamed of thus addressing Griscom face to face. "Never talks about his work. That time he was down on Park Row — short session — only two months, lucky

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devil — doesn't have to do it unless he wants to — he said he wanted to see how the newspaper shop worked. The city editor had just died and the chief offered Danny the job. Well, it was just then that the *Titanic* went down, and it seems his mother and sister were over there and had taken a passage on her — or so he thought. People used to say Danny wasn't human until that happened. They say he was as cool as a cucumber while the whole town was crazy about the horror. He had all the news to touch up as it came in — our sheet goes in for style, you know — well, there was Danny as busy on his job as a cub reporter and as calm as though he was getting in reports of the enemy's defeat. The third day he got news that his mother and the girl were safe, and he toppled right over in a faint like a woman. So after that we knew Danny Griscom was human."

As his listener made no comment, Maddox added to his impromptu biography, "He's looking pretty fit to-day, but I tell you he looked *old* when he came back! They say he spent every cent he could rake together over there and he *has* to work now till the end of the year to get even. Anyway, I know he signed a contract with the *Leader*. I say, when are you going to offer me some tea?"

"I did once," the contessa reminded him, "but you refused to be interested."

"I'll take it now, if it isn't too late." Maddox, his attention torn between the lure of the foreign title and

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that of the celebrity of his world, kept a constant eye on the subject of his conversation and suddenly exclaimed,

“He’s coming over here now.”

Nina Varesca held out his cup. “Here is your tea,” she said.

CHAPTER IV

She heard Mildred's voice. "And this is my cousin — I didn't tell you which cousin, did I — the Countess Varesca. She says she has met you — in Switzerland, was it not?"

Nina put out her hand to Griscom. Their eyes met. "Is it really you?" he said. She knew then that he had not seen her until the moment of introduction and that Mildred, innocently home-centered, had not prepared him.

"Then you *do* remember her?" Mildred interrogated, her earnest eyes upon him.

Griscom recovered himself. "Has anyone ever failed to?" he said, and Maddox wondered if he had imagined that Griscom was on the verge of being "rattled."

Mildred, weighing the matter gravely, decided that she ought to give Maddox a change of companionship. Percy had counseled her not to let Maddox get bored. "We want him to come to our afternoons, you know," he explained; "he understands me. He may become in a sense My Interpreter to The Future — who knows!" Mildred, reflecting that while *she* found Nina attractive because she was fond of her, others might not feel the same way about it,—turned to offer the art critic an opportunity that she knew he desired.

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"You were so anxious to meet Mrs. Montague Smith, Mr. Maddox. I see she is alone now — suppose we —"

"I am quite happy here, I assure you," the journalist interposed, loth to leave the countess, irritated, too, by Mildred's infelicitous trick of always turning the possibly flattering implication away from the one she addressed.

But Mildred, who had a strong predisposition to break up interested conversations under the impression that she was keeping the social current in motion, was quite firm. Griscom, so she phrased it, "would not mind being left with Nina." Maddox she knew wanted to meet Mrs. Montague Smith. As Mildred's mind was of the kind that cannot readily alter its course once set in motion, she failed to infer from Maddox's obvious annoyance that he preferred to remain where he was.

"I think they want us to leave them to reminiscences," she remarked of Nina and Griscom, and disregarding Nina's quick, "Don't desert us," passed on, conscious of being the perfect hostess.

So almost immediately they were left alone. Nina Varesca met his eyes an instant as she asked. "Can't I give you some tea?"

He acquiesced silently. The look — that almost imperceptible break-up of the impassive surface that had caught the alert eye of Maddox the moment before — had vanished or remained only as a lingering darkness, an intensification of blueness in the eyes. She glanced again at his face, — lean, clean-lined, decisive, so alive yet

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so controlled, a type it occurred to her, essentially American.

His eyes found hers and held them. "You haven't changed at all," he said.

"Is it three years or four? The ravages of time should not have made me absolutely unrecognizable. You won't give instructions, so I am making your tea on my own responsibility. Mr. Maddox wouldn't tell me either. You American men are so unmaterial."

"I beg your pardon —"

She handed him his cup — "Lemon and no sugar — unless your taste has changed."

"You remembered —" She saw that the hand that took the cup was not quite steady.

"Yes. Italian men always take so much sugar. You were my first American." He stared into his cup of tea, forgetting to drink it. She went on: "You all make me feel that time has been standing still. I find Mildred still in her teens. You know I lived in their home after my mother died. Perhaps you don't know — we never met then, did we? But I remember seeing your father once at Uncle William's. Mildred and I were like sisters."

"You are very different."

"I suppose it is I who have changed most in growing up overseas — little cakes? They are awfully good."

"No, thank you." He watched her as they talked, but looked away as their eyes met. "It is true that Mildred — Mrs. Loring — has not changed—except that

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she is happier since her marriage. Perhaps it is because she has the heart of a child. America does that. Our country is still a fairly serpentless Eden for girls and women — even New York."

"And do I look as if the serpent had been whispering in my ear?"

"Ah, you — you are different. You are a citizen of the world, unspotted by it."

"I seem at least to be proving the masculine theory that women are never happy unless they have made the conversation personal."

"Surely your difficulty lies in keeping it impersonal."

She wondered an instant what was going on under the surface play of his mind as she answered, "In Italy perhaps — yes. That is the reason meeting you was a new experience. I had seen almost nothing but Italian men who are always personal. You were the first man who would talk about *things* with me. So you see you stood out in my mind as my first American."

He answered in the same tone. "Now you are trying to rob me of that subtle flattery of remembering my tea habits."

"No, indeed, don't you see — I am adding to it."

"Ah, well — I am grateful for anything that would keep me from being forgotten." Their eyes met on that. After a little silence he spoke more simply, yet with no tinge of sentiment in his quiet voice.

"To see you again after our parting on the heights, — I had hardly expected it. I haven't grasped it yet."

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"Life is a succession of anti-climaxes, isn't it? We are neither of us to blame for the bad taste in any case. We didn't plan it."

He stared into the crowd. "To part on the heights and meet in the valleys — does that sound like an unworthy paraphrase of Mr. Loring?"

"It sounds like — disillusion."

"No," he contradicted her quickly. "Not that. That week up there in the stillness was an hour away from time and the world."

"How wonderful it was — that stillness. And how those moments away from time, as you call them, somehow stay with us when the melodramatic experience is forgotten. We look back to them, remember them, wish all of life could be like them, and yet — probably would not have it so if we could."

Her tone quite removed her words from the realm of intimate experience to that of abstract philosophizing. It was a moment before he found an answer.

"I don't philosophize much about life, I am afraid; I am a practical, work-a-day American."

"Are you so practical? I didn't seem to feel it then."

"That was a new Danny Griscom you brought into life up there, just as your Paolo creates his imaginary playfellows." Griscom's tone remained unemotional.

"Did you leave him on an Alpine hillside?"

He shook his head. "No, I brought him down with me, but he doesn't thrive in the valleys. Sometimes we have a little chat, he and I, and remember things."

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"Then perhaps some day he will come and remember them with me."

He looked down at her. Some quick change came into his face; she went on without giving him a chance to answer:

"Paolo often speaks of you—my Paolo that you gave back to me—" Her brows contracted at the recollection of the averted tragedy that had brought them together.

He smiled for the first time. "Little Paolo, the fairy prince! How I wish I might see him again."

"You can; he is with us."

At that moment Varesca entered the room and stopped a few paces from them, looking about. "There is my husband," said Nina Varesca; "he has come to take me away. But first I want you to meet each other."

Griscom turned and glanced in the direction in which she looked. "Your husband," he repeated, in a slightly changed voice.

Just then the count discovered his wife, smiled and made his way toward them.

"Mario, this is my friend, Mr. Griscom, the American who saved Paolo from drowning in Lake Geneva that summer you deserted us."

Varesca extended his hand with a cordiality formal yet sincere. "The hero who saved our Paolo's life! Then he is my friend also."

Griscom seemed less at ease. "It was nothing—the obvious thing—what anyone would have done."

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"I am afraid it isn't always the obvious thing to risk one's life to save someone else," said Nina Varesca.

"Alas no!" the Italian protested, with his dramatic enthusiasm. "May I remain?" He asked permission of his wife, then addressed her companion. "I am, you see, frankly selfish. I look always for the most charming woman present."

His wife answered in the same tone. "This flattery is suspicious. You can stay a little while, if you are very good."

Mrs. Montague Smith emerged from the crowd at that moment, and discovering Griscom greeted him rapturously. Some people moving into the other room passed between, separating them so that Varesca was left beside his wife.

"You don't appreciate Mildred," Nina remarked. She saw that Griscom permitted himself to be detained.

"She is a Donatello madonna. But she is alarming. She looks at you with her great eyes and always says what she means. I like smiling women."

"Well, there is Fair Randolph; that handsome dark-eyed girl across the room. You can't deny that she is smiling."

Mario made a grimace. "I do not ask that she shall smile all the time!"

Nina saw that Griscom permitted Mrs. Montague Smith to draw him away toward some object of discussion on the opposite side of the room. Her husband sank into a chair by her side and regarded her approv-

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ingly. "You are most alluring in that gown, *carissima*."

"Mario dear, even if you are bored with American parties, you mustn't cling to me in this fashion. You must be nice to Mildred."

The count's pantomime expressed resignation.

"*Subito*. But leave me to enjoy the sight of you an instant. I have scarcely seen you since we have been in this hideous country of yours. You are altogether charming. I see no one here I like half so well. *Ma!* I may be inconstant but I shall always return to you."

"Mario, don't be brutally frank! You are permitted to suppress the truth for art's sake, you know. I have always particularly admired the delicacy of your evasions."

The Italian looked at his wife a little curiously. "Yet I remember when we were first married several rather violent little scenes about my suppressing the truth, as you called it."

"That was before I became acclimated. Now I spare you the necessity of deceit. We both admit the frailties of masculine humanity. But it is not necessary to be explicit."

"Do you know that I have loved you longer than I had supposed possible with any woman, and in a different way?" He spoke in Italian.

She glanced up into his face which had become suddenly serious, reflecting his emotions quickly as the Latin face does.

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"What is it, Mario? In trouble already? Has some fair American taken you too seriously?"

He disregarded her trifling. "I have been thinking. . . . It has come to me here in this country where your associations are so free — I could not endure the thought of your belonging to any other man — not if I were dead. . . . The thought is madness to me — If you should ever love another man I would kill him."

Nina laughed. "Why him, poor man? Why not me, the faithless wife?"

"Don't laugh." His voice shook. The storm of the South gathered quickly.

Nina's voice took on its caressing accent. "You absurd child! The concealed weapon is there, is it?"

"It is there."

"It is against the law in my country."

"Such things have to do with but one law."

She shook her head at him, laughing as at a naughty child lightly reprov'd. "In spite of Paris, London, America — a *Meridionale* at heart!"

Under the influence of her lightness he began to recover himself. "A *Meridionale* at heart."

Mildred, coming up with Griscom and Mrs. Montague Smith, addressed herself to the count. "I have come to take you away, Mario. Miss Randolph, that stunning-looking girl over there, is dying to meet you. I know Mr. Griscom and Nina aren't half through talking yet."

The count arose with a well-simulated air of alacrity,

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to be triumphantly borne off by his hostess. "I told Mildred I couldn't lose a chance to meet a real live count—" they heard Fair's high animated tones.

Mrs. Montague Smith lingered to extract the contessa's promise for an opera night and dared to hope for a week-end at some not too distant day. Then Nina found herself again tête-à-tête with Griscom.

"When are you coming to see us?" she asked. "Paolo will want to know."

"When am I permitted?" She observed a greater formality in his tones.

"Almost any afternoon after five. Then I may tell the *bambino* that he will really see you again?"

Again that indescribable change so slight as to have escaped the notice of a less observant eye than Nina Varesca's passed over his face.

"You think he will remember me?"

"He has never forgotten you."

"Ah, that flattering Italian absoluteness!"

"I would have you understand that I am as American as you are, Mr. Griscom!"

"Let us say an American translated into Italian. I shall show my appreciation of the invitation so promptly that you will regret your hospitality." He put out his hand in farewell,—the briefest formality of contact, yet it left her aware of something strong and compelling in the man's personality. A man, she reflected, in his quiet way to dominate others. Then she realized that she had

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become the center of a group. Fair Randolph's high insistent tones pierced her consciousness.

"This may be the last time Ah'll see you-all befaw Ah take the white veil, as Willy Wright calls it. Ah will him to you, Mildred. He hasn't had any use for me since he set eyes on you. Good-by all. Next time you see me Ah'll be a blushin' bride." And so she went off with her "groom-to-be," as she called him, in leash. Fair Randolph always uttered her banalities as if they were the most piquant epigrams.

Percy Loring, entering in time to take ceremonious farewell of the engaged couple, now joined his wife and her remaining guests.

"A fine young fellow Breck!" Thus cordially the author endorsed his departing caller. "An appreciative listener, a rare thing in these days."

"Not difficult for you to find, I am sure, sir," protested the loyal Willard Wright.

Percy looked gratified. "Eh, well—I don't know about that. The scholar and the *littérateur* are none too popular in these commercial days." He became distracted. "But, contessa—not going now when we have time for a cozy litle chat—"

"But we haven't, alas!" Nina's manner had the all Italian habit of flattering implication—"another time." She left Percy Loring with a gratified smile hovering about his lips.

"I trust," Mario remarked blandly as they drove

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away, "that all great American authors are not like this old woman our cousin has married."

"He is not a great author but a popular one," Nina corrected him. Then she added, "I am not so sure about his being an old woman."

To which Mario rejoined, "Of course, my dear, a woman is the best judge of that."

CHAPTER V

The next day Mario had a toothache. Men of the Anglo-Saxon race meet physical pain in one of two ways—as the Stoic who denies the existence of his visitation until it has conquered him, or as the panic-stricken healthy animal convinced at the first twinge that death is near. In either case our men do not commonly give vocal expression to their pain, and if they do they are not admired. Not so with the Latin man, however. To him the ills of the flesh are events upon the tragic plane. His consciousness of them fills the universe. Audible expression being at once his nature and his pride, he may without false shame utter moans of anguish. There are exceptions to this type but Mario was not one of them. Under the influence of his unromantic visitation his face became a glooming mask of tragedy. He reclined by the window with closed eyes, periodically groaning, much to the surprise of the composed little American boy who had come in to play with Paolo. Nina, familiar with the Latin manner of meeting the minor adversities and able therefore to determine a fairly exact ratio between his affliction and its expression, cheerily urged upon him a pile of French novels and went out to renew acquaintance with the New York shops.

She found palaces, artificially and ambiguously

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lighted, bearing the familiar names of substantial roomy shops that she remembered as located many blocks further down town. There were counters piled up with beautiful expensive fabrics, abundant choices such as could never be found under one roof in a European city, not excepting Paris and Berlin. But where she had known the quiet, efficient if non-servile service of the American clerk or the somewhat more florid but entirely respectful offices of the Irish employee, she now found a new type,—dark-skinned, loud-voiced and familiar of manner, either indifferent or officious in service.

Passing the millinery department on an upper floor she was struck by a little white hat of a shape that she had unsuccessfully sought in Rome. A shop-girl, noting her interest, came up with such haste that she fell against her, afterwards putting over her warm apologetic hands of atonement.

The countess withdrew from the hands. "Have you a hat like that little white one, in taupe?" she asked.

"The little white hat, yes, ma'am." The girl took it out at once. "It's a lovely hat, isn't it, a *clever* hat, really—" fashion writers had just set that singularly applied adjective in motion. "A white hat is always a good investment, I think. You can wear it with anything. Try it on, dear." The girl made a movement to remove the contessa's hat-pins,—partially successful since her victim's astonishment at endearing onslaught from such a source rendered her temporarily speechless. "I don't need to tell you," the shop-girl continued, with an

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unctuously persuasive smile, "that it exactly suits your complexion."

"But I asked you if you had the hat in taupe," the countess repeated, withdrawing. "I don't want a white hat."

"But a white hat is *lovely*, madam. You can wear it with anything. I have one *myself*—" As this statement evidently seemed to the saleswoman the supreme recommendation, she was surprised and offended to find herself interrupted by her unappreciative customer.

"Have you the same hat in taupe, or could you copy it exactly?"

The dark-skinned girl rubbed dingy fingers heavily over the white velvet. "What do you want to wear it with?" she asked.

Nina repeated quietly, "I told you that I wanted a hat like it in taupe."

The clerk made a motion toward her customer's head. "Try it on, madam, and see for yourself. You can't tell till you try it on."

"There is no use," Nina told her—and something in her tone restrained the clerk's intention—"in trying it on if you can't give it to me in the color I want."

"I'm sure you'll want it, madam, when you see it on." The clerk plainly regarded her as unreasonable. "If you'll tell me what you want to wear it with, madam, I can help you to get your hat. A white hat looks lovely with anything, though. I don't see why you don't take it."

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Clearly advice was what this curious variety of salesperson conceived her to be in need of. The countess repeated in a quiet tone that somehow penetrated the other's excited ineptitude, "I don't want a white hat. Haven't you it in the color I asked for?"

The girl tossed the white hat upon its standard with indifferent aim. "Yes, ma'am, I have it in green." She took up another hat, somewhat similar but by no means identical in shape, and offered it with the air of a martyr.

"But that is green, not taupe, and it is not the same shape." The countess, although accustomed in her adopted country to a somewhat longer and more indirect shopping process than she had been used to in her native land, had decided now either to give up the hat or to ask the floor-walker for another clerk, but there was no floor-walker in sight.

"What's the matter with this hat, madam? It looks beyoutiful with your suit." The dark young woman held the bluish-green hat against the warm olive of the contessa's coat where it cried aloud for divorce.

"I don't want it to wear with this suit and if I did it does not match," the countess informed her and walked away while the girl was resentfully insisting, "It's a *beyoutiful* match, madam."

And this was Warren's, where discreet and dignified clerks had once attended her wants!

At that moment she discovered a floor-walker, but of a masculine type so closely approaching that of the girl she had just left that to ask his aid would, she felt sure,

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only mean another unequal contest with misdirected energy. So she gave up the desired hat and took the elevator to the waiting-room to rearrange her head-gear, which felt somewhat displaced after the shop-girl's assault. In the elevator and in the aisles of the shops as she walked through them she became aware that the class of shoppers in Warren's had grown as unfamiliar as the salespeople. Men, women and clerks pushed by her without apology — not infrequently with the vigorous aid of their hands — when they did not stolidly block the way.

Yet almost all of the shoppers were richly if not extravagantly dressed, in costumes more suitable for afternoon receptions than for morning wear of any kind.

In the luxurious waiting-room and in the glittering, white-enamel toilet-room she found entrances and exits blockaded by little groups of modishly-dressed women of a heavily-built type, accompanied by children either boisterous or crying. Several of these were running about the waiting-room, powerfully vocal, colliding with the unwatchful passer-by. Truly it seemed the tenements had overflowed Fifth Avenue and, grown prosperous too swiftly to have been educated out of their untrammelled habit, continued unrebuked to obstruct the more civilized operations of a one-time American city.

She passed out of Warren's and went up the street a few blocks to Jerrold's, where she had inherited an account from her grandmother. At the silk counter she

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found a grey-haired clerk of the type that she had often longed for on the Continent,—civil, competent, time-saving, thoroughly familiar with materials, value and his “stock.” Here she quickly found what she wanted, although strong mint fumes arriving with the dark-skinned little cash-boy, revealed the fact that even Jerrold’s discipline had relaxed at that point.

In the children’s department of this shop she found a woman clerk, somewhat bleached and withered now, who had been in the ladies’ underwear department fifteen years before. Mutual recognition ensued and to this faithful survivor the countess explained the kind of union suit she wanted for Paolo and confided her bewilderment at the changes in the New York shops.

The old clerk smiled a little sadly. “Yes, madam, New York has changed greatly of late years, not only the clerks, but the customers.”

“I have just been annoyed by such an officious clerk at Warren’s,” the countess remarked. “She seemed to expect to choose my hat for me.”

Her attention wandered to a little pale blue bathrobe of Paolo’s size, but was recalled by the intelligence of the woman’s answer, which was made while she quickly and deftly exhibited samples of the desired articles.

“It is because the class of people in New York has changed, madam. The city is full of foreigners and the children of foreigners who have made money quickly here. Those people depend upon the shop clerks to tell them what they want. You can see them on the street

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wearing everything from evening dresses to skating costumes. They wear the straw hats in January that we put out for our Southern trade. They have no knowledge of what is correct. These are all that we have in stock at present, madam."

The countess selected two of the miniature undergarments and compared their merits. "I am very much surprised to find such clerks in the good New York shops," she remarked.

"Yes, it is too bad," the old clerk agreed. "The younger salespeople it is true, often do not know how to wait on ladies. Indeed ladies who are in a position to avoid it do not come to us any more. Their maids or their dressmakers do the larger part of their shopping. A few old customers come to the clerks they have known, but most of the older clerks have been discharged."

"But why?" Nina asked.

"Sometimes because they can get the young foreign clerks for less and sometimes when the management of the shops changes —"

While the countess was making her maternal decision, she heard her clerk civilly but a little wearily answering the languid questions of a young shop-girl with dyed hair: "Just where I told you yesterday. If they had been put in a different place you would have been informed."

Nina selected three undergarments and gave her address. She watched the quiet, dignified woman give instructions to the indifferent little cash-girl, who answered

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"Sure" in a deep hoarse voice when told to hurry. Like the chauffeur, the hotel hall-boy and the cash-boy, all her energies seemed bent to the process of mastication.

Turning from this offense to the sense of sight and smell, she caught sight of a blithe little garment on a form that would have peculiarly suited Paolo a few years ago and suggested therefore to her maternal sense its fitness for the beloved familiar type. "What a charming little coat!" she exclaimed. "How I wish my little boy was young enough to wear it."

The old clerk glanced at the small garment. "Yes, it is a pretty little model, isn't it, madam? But it is so badly shopworn you would not want it in any case. Customers of the kind we were speaking of *will* handle any goods that are within their reach. It sometimes seems to me as if they had to *look* with their hands like blind people. The loss to the shops in goods soiled that way is enormous. Sometimes the things are utterly ruined."

Nina took her change and departed, feeling as she had more than once since her return that she was living in one of those dreams in which the familiar place is somehow always disturbingly different. It was New York, and yet not the New York she had known and longed to see again.

She next turned in the direction of a French shop recommended by Mildred, a branch of one she was familiar with in Paris.

Interested to observe the pageant of the once familiar

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street she had not taken a cab that morning, but before long she began to regret it.

Twice at an unpoliced corner a motor slipping with noiseless swiftness from behind an obscuring object had nearly run over her. On both occasions the man at the wheel had glanced back at her, laughing as at some excellent joke. Once when a lame old man walking with a crutch had to run to escape the wheels, she saw the face of a fat chauffeur break into wide smiles of delight.

At a crowded cross-walk she felt pushing hands at her back. Turning around she saw the owner of the hands, — a squat woman of peasant type, but very modern in costume; a type the farthest possible remove from that which through many generations has inherited the right to the title American; yet "an American" is what the woman (in broken English) would undoubtedly have declared herself. Nina noted that the peasant's eyes, vague rather than eager, seemed fixed on nothingness; the relaxation of the parted lips, the whole expression indicated a mental condition the reverse of haste or impatience. Evidently that groping, pushing movement of the hands was the purely instinctive impulse of the primitive creature to assist other senses and members. She had observed it among the crowds of emigrant women in the steerage of the Italian steamer on which she had crossed. Had Fifth Avenue, once the dignified thoroughfare of the civilized American, become then a sort of prosperous Continental steerage, addicted to usages as remote from those of the socially advanced

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human being as prehensile methods of locomotion?

As she stood waiting for the crowd to move forward an errand boy knocked his way sharply through the congested group, whistling shrilly, only to loiter on the other side. The crowd started forward as the space cleared. There was no royal orderer of traffic in the center of the maelstrom, and half-way across the street a group of very dark, very short young women, who except for their mature figures resembled half-grown girls, scattered shrieking with panicky laughter, striking violently out in either direction with blind, self-preservative hands — an action that might easily have cast an unwary neighbor under the wheels of the approaching vehicle.

Half-way down the block a knot of people (including the errand boy) stood about some invisible object of interest. A tangle of children on roller skates crashing past like projectiles, charged stumbling into the group. One of them caught a grey-haired woman standing on the outskirts of the crowd about the ankle with his skate and knocked her down. A negro picked her up and asked if she was hurt. No one else seemed interested. Nina saw the boys' inquisitive faces upturned. They also were alien types. The once familiar Anglo-Saxon mould, sharpened into Americanism, even the characteristically Irish type once so familiar in the child of the street, seemed to have disappeared, overwhelmed by the omnipresent Continental alien. Without waiting to discover the cause of their concerted interest the countess passed on.

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At Fleuret's a very elaborately-costumed clerk came forward with a bold appraising glance at the contessa's clothes to ask what she wanted. She also was dark-skinned, French or some other nationality similar in appearance, and spoke with an accent.

In answer to the contessa's request for a warm coat for country wear, the clerk selected some to be exhibited by models. The girls employed as models, although young, were all overdeveloped in figure, and instead of displaying the costumes with the unobtrusive effectiveness of the French mannikin, they called freely back and forth to each other — slangy personalities — as they promenaded about with frequent glances in the contessa's direction as if expecting a sympathetic response on her part.

More new types! The American shop-girls she remembered, however unornamental in manner, had never forced awareness of their presence in this offensive fashion. Suddenly the nostrils of the countess were assaulted with the strong sickly odor that in a single morning had become nauseatingly familiar. Glancing at the girl nearest her she saw that her jaws were moving rhythmically.

The coats that the clerk had selected were all elaborate wraps for afternoon wear. The countess rose.

"Thank you, this isn't the sort of thing I want." As she moved toward the door an exclamation followed her that sounded very much like, "*Good night.*"

Near the door she noticed a number of coats of the

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kind she had asked for in a glass case, but she made no further inquiries.

At the entrance she discovered that the street had suddenly become densely crowded with a horde of thickly-set men and women slowly promenading three, four and six abreast.

She turned to the clerk who had followed to offer her a geranium velvet evening wrap.

"Thank you, no. I don't need an evening wrap. I wanted something for golf — that sort of thing. Will you call a cab for me?"

"Certainly." The woman's manner became more deferential. A model who had followed her paused an instant in her mastication and took another deliberate look at the contessa's clothes. They were what she would have called "advance models" had she been aware of the intentions of Paris. As she was not, their effect was hard for her to classify. Of that new and rude class of shop-girls who does not know qualities, she found herself unable to place the contessa's costume at its commercial value, and had therefore no safe label for this reserved customer who yet somehow, she knew not why, restrained her obtrusive buoyancy.

As she passed out Nina noticed a slender girl looking in the window. As the girl turned to walk on she recognized Bertha Rennels.

"See anything you like well enough to go through the agonies of trying to purchase it?" Nina inquired, as she joined her. Bertha answered with her faint smile.

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"I am rather taken with that one." She indicated a bizarre concoction in tulle.

"It looks more French than the manners of the clerks," Nina agreed. "Which way are you going? I'll take you there wherever it is." She drew Bertha toward her cab. "When I remember the dignified Fleuret place in Paris," she remarked as they started off with the usual flourish to stop with the invariable jerk, "I can't believe that this place belongs to the same people."

"Remember you are in the land of freedom where the exhilarated alien takes leave of his manners and his children grow up without any, either of our kind or theirs," Bertha lightly reminded her.

"They seemed to feel some respect for my cab," remarked Nina. "Up to that moment they were very friendly, not to say intimate."

"Called you 'dear'?"

"Not there. One did at Warren's. I couldn't believe my ears."

"They will — unless you go in your own motor with a footman. Not even a cab will save you from endearment unless you care to take the time to discipline them a little. There is enough of the old world in most of them yet to respond to treatment."

"Would I then have been spared the fumes of gum?" Nina questioned.

Bertha shook her head. "No, the gum would still

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have been with you. I think the foreign shopkeepers here who represent the rawest type of mushroom growth do not realize that they should not permit it. Even when they know better they seem to be helpless in the hands of their employees. You see the only classification those people know how to make is that of income. Beyond that they only know that some people came here and that others were born here. They have no idea of what we mean by an American."

"I remember once when I was a girl, I went into a queer, dark, little shop in Fourteenth Street to see what it was like," Nina recalled. "But I found no such uncouth familiar objectionable clerks there as I have met this morning at Warren's and Fleuret's."

"I know," Bertha agreed with the resignation of the helpless resident. "New York seems to have become utterly hoodlumized — shops, restaurants, street-cars, theatres."

Suddenly the countess exclaimed, "Will you *look* at those people! Am I in New York or passing through a Russian Ghetto!"

"It is always like this at noon," the acclimated Bertha told her.

Both sides of the street were filled with the thick crowd which, moving like a slow machine without power to turn out for the pedestrian advancing from the opposite direction, bore solidly and heavily along the sidewalk, apparently oblivious of collision. Although

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thinner at the point from which they viewed it, it stretched downtown from Thirty-fourth Street as far as the eye could reach.

"And this is America!" the countess exclaimed in a long retrospective comparison of past and present, using unconsciously the very apostrophe that Mario had used for his first unflattering impression of the great "American" metropolis. "They seem to labor under the curious impression that they can walk through each other." Nina observed. "How strange to see people like that on Fifth Avenue!"

"They *are* undeviating!" Bertha agreed, "but their children are worse. One Saturday afternoon when I was out matching something — which does not improve the disposition — I finally spoke to one long sallow youth. 'You couldn't help knocking into me perhaps,' I said, 'but you *can* help putting your hands on me afterwards. You don't seem to realize that it is very objectionable.' You should have seen his bewildered stare. People of that sort don't attach our significance to touch, I imagine."

"They all know better in their own country, I am sure," Nina reflected. "They seem somehow to deteriorate here with their greater advantages."

"But it's the ones brought up here who utterly lose their moorings," Bertha diagnosed. "They are just hybrids, neither European nor American."

The cab, having made good time after crossing Forty-

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second Street, had now reached the street in which Bertha lived.

Having secured her promise for a future meeting, Nina left Bertha at her boarding-house, which was next door to a Russian tailor's shop. The street was one of a block of brown-stone houses that Nina remembered as most desirable when she had lived in New York. Now, it had that unspeakably desolate look of the neighborhood that has seen better days.

In the hallway of her hotel she met, unexpectedly, Griscom. He had seen her first this time. She divined it from some indefinable vanishing expression in his eyes.

"At this hour I suppose I cannot persuade myself into the belief that you came to see us," she added to her greeting.

He turned and walked with her toward the elevator.

"I am lunching — here, I think — with a classmate from California." He stated the fact simply, looking down at her. It came to her that the quality in him that Maddox had so elaborately described was strongly marked in face and personality. Nothing, she felt, that life or death might force him to meet could undermine that quiet strength, of his.

"Is it a happy experience to be in America again?" he asked. "Or have you traveled too far away from it in spirit to feel at home?" Although it might readily seem a manufactured question, she knew that he cared to hear her answer.

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"You will have it that I have lost my Americanism. I have not, I assure you, but it feels a little bewildered here. I feel like a Rip Van Winkle, but I am sure it is New York that has gone away from me."

"Oh, of course, New York isn't America; it isn't even a sane place. It is full of people that don't know what an American is. New York is a mob, a fungus growth, a hot-house for weeds, a geometric impossibility. It isn't a place to live in. I hope — every sane person must hope — to get out of it some day."

"Where will you go?" She put it lightly, yet under her question was the same desire to know.

He considered gravely. "Not out of my own country," he said, "for I think I am one of those who belong. Only somewhere out of New York."

"But this is your home. You are a New Yorker, too."

"I am indeed one of that small section of the population born in America, and of that still smaller group of those born in New York."

"Then I should think you would rather stay here, even overrun as it is."

"No, that is the reason. New York is the city that was. The thing we used to be fond of doesn't exist any more."

"That is what I feel," she said. They had reached the elevator, but she stood a moment without entering. "Can the rest of the country be saved, or will it, a little later, all get like this?"

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"If we can't stop the raw and waste material from pouring in from the other side, Heaven knows what it will become. But even so it seems a sort of duty to stand by and see if one can't help steer the ship of state into the port she was sailing for. It was a fine old ship. Our ancestors gave their blood to preserve its high ideals of freedom. It seems rather our job to try to keep that ideal from becoming unlimited license instead. At present we are threatened with the loss of everything that has made it possible for us to offer the emigrant the home that he and his children — especially his children — are attempting to tear down as fast as they can."

Disappointment sat upon the features of the passionately intent elevator boy. This was not the kind of conversation he had a right to expect from men and women *en tête-à-tête*. He consulted with his associate of the adjoining elevator. He continued to listen but resentfully, unaware that it was in part his case that they were in the abstract considering.

"Oh, he's one of them fellers that *talks*," the listener, balked of his sensation, proclaimed with bitter emphasis.

At that moment the countess bade her companion farewell and entered the elevator, but the youth at the wheel waited, attracted by the sight of a virulently blonde young woman approaching with an attentive male companion. Both were speaking in the low voice of confidence. Bidding her companion a coquettish farewell the girl stepped into the elevator. The revived elevator boy, staring at his reminiscently smiling passenger, began to

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whistle a popular tune on the ascent. That was his way of expressing his mental stimulation on the supreme subject of interest in life. Downstairs again, ready for fresh interests, the loud attempts of an embryonic actress talking with an acquaintance to attract attention to herself and her affairs only caused him to turn away his head like the cat who spurns her saucer of milk. It was not the people who wanted to be heard that the elevator boy wished to listen to, but those unconscious and undesirous of listeners, and those whose faces and demeanor not proclaiming their emotions seemed to him to conceal mystery.

So these abnormal products of abnormal conditions, angry servers in the city's extravagant yet crudely conducted palaces, deflected from the standard of wholesome labor for normal hire, unhappily and unhealthily, live the derivative life.

CHAPTER VI

In the apartment Nina found Mario receiving guests, a young Roman by the name of Rizzi in the diplomatic service, and a middle-aged Milanese who had invented a brilliant but not entirely practical fixture for an aeroplane. The room had seemed full of people and voices when she entered, but she realized presently that there were only three including her husband. The raised voices all talking in unison, their dramatic excitement over trivialities — which must always seem absurd or alarming to the unaccustomed Anglo-Saxon — gave the impression of confusion and numbers. She joined sparingly in the conversation with her tactful responsiveness. The forms of expression she used were not unlike those of her companions, but for the first time since her marriage she was conscious as she talked with them of a different attitude toward her husband's race. Her first young impression returned to her,—more formulated and coherent. Their enthusiasm over a familiar banality, their exaggerated vivacity of gesture and expression, the characteristic excess of language for the thought, seemed suddenly ridiculous and childish. How many times had she made excuses to leave the room when the confused babel of the Italian voices had exasperated her ear! Then unbidden came an almost overwhelm-

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ing sense of Griscom's personality, his power of silence, the significance of his few words, their very real relation to his actions and beliefs.

Pictures and impressions of the morning came back to her with a new meaning. Uncouth as that undisciplined, alien crowd in the street had been, there was yet a certain connection between those peasants and these gentlemen of Italy. The fundamental opposition was there,—in the finely civilized and subtilized Latin aristocrat as in the rude product of Eastern Europe, grown ruder with his misused freedom—the one fundamental distinguishing difference between the controlled Anglo-Saxon who sets justice above impulsive sympathy, and the expressive races; between the man who sets for himself the altruistic ideal—however far he may depart from it—and the emotional, personal being that must ever seem to the opposing type immature, childish. Was she after all inherently Anglo-Saxon? In Italy she had not felt aware of it, though she had from the first recognized the differences. . . .

She was recalled by the adieux of their guests and realized afresh, as she had first felt it, the incomparable charm of their grace and courtesy. She would not have had that different even at the cost of a greater directness.

At lunch, Mario having portentously announced that he felt better, she suggested a drive in the Park—drives in the Park having been in order in her day in New York. After much grave consideration as to its possible dangers, he finally consented to go. In the amusement

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of discussing the types they glimpsed in passing, Mario forgot his lingering twinges until a silence fell, then with exquisite sensibility he would lay his hand upon the afflicted part, murmuring "Dio!"

In the Park Nina realized the same changes that she had found in the shops and on the Avenue. The anomalous pleasure-seekers as well as the tramp or the respectably-clad onlooker on the benches, were practically all alien. The disturbing undercurrent started by these new impressions was working in her mind while she made such response as Mario demanded of her.

She was a woman who had lived her life necessarily much upon the surface, yet lived it with a sensitive consciousness of the claims and obligations of others. Her code had been one evolved more from her supercivilized sense of things than from any accepted moral basis. She had heard little of ethical or religious motives since her early girlhood. She had lived in sympathetic relations with those about her, tactful and considerate without having arrived at any painful sense of life's burdens or of the responsibility of other lives. But here, it seemed, one had to be conscious of others' lives. Here was none of the isolation of her aristocratic Italian life or of her protected American girlhood. Here were alien forces grown strong and rebellious, pressing against one. Here were things to be resisted, overcome, directed; material for the reformer and the sociologist. She found it all vaguely disturbing.

When they returned to the hotel the clerk handed the

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countess an envelope bearing the hotel stamp, addressed to herself. A gentleman had called, the clerk informed her, and had left this note. Opening it she found a blank card with a few lines written on it in a cramped handwriting: "Am *désolé* to have missed you. Will try again." The initials P. C. L. did not at first convey anything to her. But in a moment she remembered the distinguished author.

"What is it?" the count asked her quickly.

She handed him the card. "Mr. Loring and Mildred have called, or Mr. Loring alone — probably to bring some message or invitation. He spoke about it yesterday, but Mildred said she couldn't come to-day."

Mario glanced at the card. "Why '*désolé*'?" he inquired coldly.

The countess laughed. "Absurd person! How can Mildred take him seriously!" But this observation was not of the kind to draw response from Mario. It seemed that he also must take the distinguished author seriously.

"Do we have to spend all of our time in America with our cousins?" he demanded. They spoke in Italian which did not happen to be the language of the elevator boy, thus taking unfair advantage of that interested soul.

"I want to see a great deal of Mildred — I hope without the necessity for including her celebrated husband too often. I will find out when genius is likely to burn and will make my engagements with her then."

"*Speriamo!* When I was talking yesterday with the

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young lady with the brilliant color who laughs all the time, your school friend —”

“Fair Randolph,” Nina supplied the name from the description.

“She told me that Mr. Loring was, as she expressed it, ‘crazy about you.’” They were now on their way to their apartment. “She tells me he spent the entire afternoon talking to you.”

“Fair has somewhat more than our national tendency to exaggeration. He did talk with me for some time certainly — longer than I could have wished.”

“Then you were not interested?”

“Oh, yes; he interests me as a type.” They were standing at the door of their apartment. The count had touched the bell and Assunta, their Italian servant, admitted them. Some newly-arrived letters took his attention and Nina passed into the reception room. It was a conventional hotel apartment done in yellow and gold; as she glanced about it she felt a sense of chill and withdrawal. She was a woman fond of her own belongings who found little to amuse her and much to dislike in hotel living, especially, she had discovered, in New York hotel living. Yet it had seemed the only practical plan for their short stay. She took a seat by the window and looked down at the restless ant-like crowd on the street. Always that crush of humanity, even here on what used to be the upper part of the Avenue. Her husband joined her, letters in hand; his eyes searched hers.

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"Of what are you thinking?"

"That I do not feel like myself in this place. That is nonsense, is it not! One should have sufficient character to rise above environment."

Her husband made a face of humorous distaste. "Character, character,—always you Americans talk of things like character and duty! Is your racial character then so superior to ours?" His wife at once parted with her seriousness — it came to her that since the very early days of her marital adjustment she had always done so in her conversations with her husband.

"No, *ragazzo*, it is only that we like to talk about it."

But Mario seemed to be in one of his infrequent analytical moods. "Nevertheless there is a difference —" He too, then, in his way, was aware of the difference. —"You do things that you do not want to do for *duty*. We do them for love; for love of sweetheart, wife, mother — country, perhaps. You do them for love of an idea, a cold, abstract idea of right."

"The idea of humanity in the abstract, the altruistic idea," said Nina Varesca, then wished she had not said it. But why? Mario's brief interest in the conversation had faded. He had apparently not recognized her characterization as an enunciation of the higher standard, only of a different one. Was it that her own formulation and acknowledgment of this difference in standard was in itself disturbing? Her husband's next remark was a return to the personal note.

"So you do not feel at home here. But you should;

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this is your country. You should feel at home. Ah, I think you have become altogether Italian and you no longer love your ugly city!"

"No." Something in her swiftly rose in defense. "It isn't that. I do not compare. Italy gives us one thing and America another. But it is so changed here, so full of strange people. The buildings are almost all new. I am at home and not at home."

Mario took possession of her hand. "It is that you are homesick for Italy and do not know it. We shall return as soon as possible. Your climate is an impossibility. It is that which I have to thank for my sufferings. I do not have toothache in Italy."

She smiled. "Putting off a visit to the dentist might have something to do with that, *ragazzo*."

Assunta entered with some flowers that had just arrived.

The count looked up, his toothache forgotten. "Who sent them?"

"Mildred, I imagine. There was no card." She took the flowers, lifting them to her face. They were flawless pink roses, cold, dewy, without fragrance. She suspected that the author was the donor.

She handed them to Assunta. "Has the Signorino finished his supper, Assunta?" Assunta combined the duties of nurse and lady's maid. The Italian girl nodded.

"Si, he has but just finished."

"Send him in to me."

Her face cleared. Paolo would bring her the sense of

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home. New York, Italy, what did the place matter? She would go to see Mildred to-morrow, bridge over their differences, get at the real thing, underneath. She did not demand understanding of her inner self. Where in Italy would she have found it! She had not thought about these things until the last few years. She had accepted without thinking it out that in one's inner self things went on that no one understood. Then that summer when Mario, following some will-o'-the-wisp of pleasure, had left her in Switzerland with Paolo, she had met a man of a type she had neither known nor imagined. His mind had given hers a new impulse. If there were other men like him — how different must be the relations of men and women in America! Her slight reading of American books had not impressed her with this fact as the actual contact with the American mind had done. She had always known that she did not reason like Mario or his mother or his sister or their Italian friends, yet her first contact with Mildred and Percy Loring had made her feel that her husband's people were after all less alien than this girl of her own family and race. But now she began to realize that that particular difference was individual. Bertha Rennels did not seem alien, nor had Jane Worthing. On the contrary they had given her, even in the few words she had exchanged with them a new sense of mental stimulation, of communication. Even Mrs. Montague Smith's conversation had seemed fresh and inspiring compared with the exquisitely uttered platitudes of the average

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Italian woman that she met. And that young Lochinvar, Willard Wright, despite his ingenuousness, suggested a manly, responsible quality that could scarcely have been found in an Italian youth of his age. Yet his flat, unsubdued voice, his uncultivated enunciation of English, were surely as unpleasant as the emulatively raised voices of Mario's compatriots, and his easy slang as banal as their sentimental platitudes.

But also it was undeniable that this young Wright and Taylor Maddox,—types, Bertha Rennels had told her, of the hastily veneered American—despite the lack of sophistication in their early environment, had a refinement in their manner of eating that no Italian knows previous to his contact with the Anglo-Saxon. Accustomed as she was to that exquisite finish of manner, the heritage of breeding and tradition, which was the natural unacquired possession of all her Italian associates, the two Western men seemed of an incredible naïveté. But Griscom, in her mind the type of the American man, the American gentleman,—assuredly he did not lack finish. He seemed only to discard the superfluous. Italy could never have produced a Daniel Griscom, a Jane Worthing or a Bertha Rennels. Neither, it occurred to her, could it have evolved a Percy Loring!

An exclamation from Mario interrupted her musings. Glancing over at him, she caught his most debonair smile upon his face, as he read the evening paper. He was twisting his moustache, and the eyes that he raised to hers were gleaming.

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"Your opera was very good the other night, was it not?" he remarked. "We must go often. It is one thing at least to enjoy in your grey city."

"We can go to-night, if you like."

"Not necessarily to-night, but soon." He leaned back idly, his hands clasped behind his head and began to sing Nedda's song from "Pagliacci." Mario's singing was of a kind usual with Italians — a great deal of "temperament," an indifferent adherence to key and an apparently inexhaustible memory for the words. Nina, having been born with a musician's ear, had never greatly enjoyed these musical outbreaks, but she was glad that Mario had forgotten his toothache, and was feeling more cheerful. His moods of gloom in their inclusiveness had an almost epic quality.

Paolo's radiant little face appeared at the door, asking permission to enter. At his mother's signal he flew into the room, followed by an ecstatic bull terrier, the property of the child who had been spending the day with him. The dog, sympathetic with any move that did not shut him out from human companionship, wagged an energetic tail while Paolo tumultuously kissed his mother, then ran to greet his father, who pushed him impatiently away.

But Paolo's face did not fall as it would have had he been repulsed by his mother. He knew that his father's moods varied inexplicably from ardent, demonstrative affection to abrupt dismissal, and that ten minutes later he might play with him wonderfully, like another child.

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He seized the Boston bull in his arms, showering kisses upon its appreciatively bobbing head. His father paused in a bar of the Bird song and glanced at him with a smile.

"Don't waste your kisses on a dog, Paolo; *he* doesn't know the difference."

"Ah, but *I* do!" Paolo flashed back, and with the swiftness of wings was at his mother's side again. She laid her hand on his curls and smiled. It came to her that all the difference between father and son lay in those words. With inexplicable intuition, touching things that no child could understand, Paolo had voiced a whole psychology of love in those words, love of a kind undreamed-of in his father's philosophy.

Nina bent to pick up the newspaper her husband had thrown down. Her eye chanced to light upon a small paragraph announcing the recent arrival in New York of one Luisa Castiglione from the Scala in Milan who would "join the forces" of the opera company, replacing a certain temperamental German soubrette, who had had a difference of opinion with the management.

Luisa Castiglione. Yes, most certainly she remembered the Luisa Castiglione, the radiant Nedda who had been the toast of the season at Monte Carlo last winter!

CHAPTER VII

"I must entertain Nina," Mildred remarked to her husband that evening at dinner. "What would you suggest?"

Percy considered. "Why not a woman's lunch at the New Amsterdam Club?"

Mildred, immediately and dutifully acquiescent, began to choose her guests. "I'll ask Mrs. Montague Smith; she seemed to take such a fancy to Nina; and Fair, of course, and Edith Wickham — we used always to be together, Jane and Nina and Edith and I —" she broke off, her color rising, then courageously faced her oracle with the unwelcome suggestion. "Percy, I *would* like to ask Jane. She and Nina were such friends —"

She got no further. The author laid down his fork and treated his wife to a stare of incredulity, so dramatically prolonged that it must surely have been disciplinary in intention.

"Is it possible that you are referring to that disreputable Jane Worthing?"

Mildred's distressed eyes implored his forbearance.

"Jane Worthing, who came in Sunday — Nina was so fond of her —"

Her husband, resuming his fork, put the matter in

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its proper light. "In their ignorant school-days, no doubt. Surely now that that once innocent girl has transcended the bounds of decency—"

For the first time in their married life Mildred interrupted. "Please, Percy—I can't bear to hear you speak like that of Jane."

"She is a licentious person."

"Percy dear—" Mildred's cheek was crimson.

"I know what I am talking about." Percy's manner admitted of no dispute. "I went to her studio once—I was obliged to, needless to state—and she actually had sketches of nude bodies pinned up on her walls."

"She is an artist, dear. They often have nude models in their studies."

"For purposes of study no doubt, but it is not necessary surely to flaunt such things upon their walls."

"But what is it that Jane has done, Percy dear. Please tell me quite plainly. I feel that I ought to know, yet I don't like to ask anyone else. It would seem like gossiping about poor Janie—"

"Poor Janie—" Percy's sarcasm bore down a bit heavily, "if you *must* know then,—she eloped with a man who could not marry her—without an expensive divorce which neither of them could afford—and simply lived with him until he died."

"He died." Mildred repeated. Her shocked, pained face convinced her husband that he had made his effect.

"He had consumption."

"How terrible!" Mildred's eyes were large and

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frightened. "I wouldn't have believed it of Jane. She was always so exquisite and fine. "Yet perhaps it wasn't quite so wicked as if — She was taking care of him — a dying man, Percy —"

"Dying with sin on his soul."

"But if she loved him — she must have suffered."

"She deserved to." The moralist unflinchingly pronounced his judgment.

Mildred looked up at him adoringly, pleadingly. "Percy dear, you are so strong yourself. You cannot expect everyone to come up to your own high standard."

"Perhaps not," the author agreed frankly, "but there are limits —" his tone became severe — "which no pure woman can cross and remain within the pale, and I must say that I do not like to hear you justifying this woman."

"I was not justifying what she has done, of course —" Mildred's childlike face revealed all her confusion and distress — "only I knew Janie so well and I can't believe that —"

Her husband interrupted her in the tone of a kind father addressing an illogical child. "Plan your party, my dear; don't think about ugly things. They rub off on one, you know — they rub off."

Mildred, silenced, returned to the subject of her guests. "Then I will ask Fair and Edith and Mrs. Montague Smith and Bertha Rennels, Nina seemed to like her so much —" The expression on her husband's face again brought her to a pause.

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"Bertha Rennels," Percy meditated. "Would it be quite kind to include her, my dear?"

"Kind?" Mildred looked bewildered.

"To take her out of her milieu when she must necessarily so soon return to her muttuns."

"Out of her milieu?" Mildred looked puzzled. "I don't know just what you mean. Bertha is poor and earning her living now, but her people belong to one of the old New York families. Our grandparents were friends. Nina was very fond of her sister Nancy."

Percy's smile was pale. "But we are living in the present, my dear, and in the present Bertha is a stenographer, is she not?"

"A stenographer? No, dear, of course not — although she told me she would make more if she were — she reads manuscripts for a publishing house."

"Very much the same thing. Stenographers are frequently promoted to those positions, Creston tells me. Magazine editors even give manuscripts to the office boys to read. Their point of view is valuable. The arts are for the people in these days."

Mildred, though docile, was accurate. Her conscientious mind was now absorbed with the necessity for a correction. "Percy dear, I was mistaken. Bertha is not with that publishing house any more. She is writing for the magazines. She is doing some articles for *MacNulty's Magazine* now. Don't you remember we had a copy with an aëroplane on the cover last month, and it had an article on Maurice Franken, that man that writes

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drummer stories, with a lot of pictures of his house. You said it was a shameless write-up, don't you remember? Bertha didn't do that one, but she told me she was doing a series something like that for them."

The great author kindly bent his mind to the task of recalling trivialities, and seemed to be open to conviction now on the subject of Bertha. "I *have* a hazy recollection of the article. Well, my dear, do as you choose. Ask little Bertha. It will give her a nice change, though I think she would enjoy it more to have an intimate little afternoon tea with us in the library. Something that she can write about afterwards and earn a cheque. I rather doubt, judging from her costume of Sunday afternoon, if she will have the right kind of clothes for a fashionable lunch."

Although nothing on earth could alter Mildred's conviction that her Percy was always and inevitably right, some nameless feeling prevented her from letting his presentation of the case pass unmodified.

"I don't think of it as kindness to Bertha, Percy. And she is asked out a great deal all the time, almost as much as when she had a home. I am asking her just as I would ask any friend, because I want her. As for her clothes, I think they are better taste than the awfully over-elaborate things you see on some women."

Something in the antecedent sources of social viewpoint, the thing that caused Mildred, unperceptive and literal as she was, to make decisions and discriminations based upon some inbred standard utterly foreign and

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opposed to any that her husband knew, caused him to feel inexpressibly irritated by this remark. He expressed his resentment in an unconscious betrayal of his own very different inferences.

"How is it, dear Mildred, that you, your father's daughter, a person of unquestioned position in New York, should have for your friends these two young breadwinners, one of them a person of more than doubtful character? It is difficult to understand—" Percy presented the case as one that clearly demanded an explanation.

And Mildred's manner, as she gave it, for the moment lacked something of its usual deferential air of referring the case to him.

"As I have just told you, Percy dear, we were old friends. Bertha's father left nothing when he died, he had lost it all in speculation. So Bertha has had to do something."

"Surely she could have gone to relatives."

"She had no near ones except her sister. Besides, she didn't want to."

Percy diagnosed Bertha's case neatly. "I see. That misguided desire to take the man's place that young women have now-a-days."

Surprisingly Mildred continued to disagree with him though gently. "No, I don't think so in this case, dear. Bertha is a proud little thing. As for Jane, her father was a portrait painter who married one of mother's friends. Her mother died while she was at school, and

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when her father died a few years afterwards in Paris they found out that he had somehow used up all her money. I don't know that it was ever much. He was very impractical and charming. I know Janie adored him."

"All roads lead back to the impossible Janie again." The author repudiated the dessert with what seemed undue bitterness—almost, Mildred reflected, as if poor Janie had been responsible for its lack of digestibility.

"I was only answering your question, dear." Mildred's reply was not intended as a retort, but she realized when she made it that she had incurred her husband's displeasure. She hastened to make atonement. "And perhaps you would like me to ask that vivacious Madame La Vallière, who was here Sunday. You wanted me to be polite to her."

"Ask her by all means," Percy acquiesced at once. "I am sure she will give pleasure to all your guests."

Mildred apologetically ate the dessert which Percy's dyspepsia had rejected. When the author had been appeased with some cold rice pudding left from lunch, his wife ventured to voice a doubt that ever since her first meeting with the vivacious Madame La Vallière had intermittently assailed her.

"Of course I know she is all right if you admire her, Percy. But I *did* think she went a little too far in her criticisms of America that day she was here."

"Is that so? I found her most sympathetic. She

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had just read 'The Silver Cloud' and seemed to have a very rare understanding of its inner meanings."

"Oh, of course she is *very* intelligent," Mildred agreed. Then another doubt rose and overwhelmed her. "But I *do* wish she wouldn't make up so much."

Percy gave his wife a steady glance. As she met it he looked down at his digestible pudding and smiled. "Most women do in these decadent days. The difference is that Madame La Vallière does it better."

It sounded convincing, but Mildred still retained a doubt. "Then why does it show so much? I said the first time I went to Paris and saw some of the women with orange-colored hair and cheeks that were actually *magenta* that they must put it on in the dark. And Nina told me that most of the really French apartments were awfully dark —"

But the author rising from the table gently restrained this childish prattle. "Enough of that black coffee, my dear; you will have no nerves left." His physician had forbidden that dangerous stimulant to the sensitively organized author. As he led the way to the library where they spent their evenings at home Percy inquired, "Then have you arranged for all your guests?"

"With Mrs. Wilmot and Nina it will make eight," Mildred reported, and was rewarded by receiving the seal of her husband's approval.

And she had every reason to feel her lunch party a success, if the animated conversation of her guests was any criterion. Fair Randolph and Madame La Vallière,

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maintaining separate centres of interest, made themselves the most felt vocally. Mrs. Wilmot and Fair, although placed opposite each other, contrived to carry on a detailed conversation of personal rather than general interest, while Madame La Vallière, embracing a wider scope, engaged not only her overwhelmed neighbor, Mrs. Montague Smith, but all who would listen. The countess, placed between Mrs. Montague Smith and Edith Wickham, talked with the latter to such extent as was possible against the confusing reverberations of the Greek woman's voice, but from time to time, they both found themselves forced to relapse into an exhausted silence. Into one of these recuperative pauses the high, unfatigued voice of Madame La Vallière rose in declamatory grievance.

"But I tell you, you cannot understand, madame. You are a crude, a young, an immature people. We are an old, a degenerate people, we do not think as you do about these things."

Mrs. Montague Smith, for the moment quite overcome at being patronized on the score of a superior degeneracy, was temporarily speechless. It was the countess who made the next remark.

"I think Europeans have a way of assuming that America has been created by spontaneous generation or some such process. They forget that our forefathers who came here a few hundred years ago came as the representative people of several classes of that period, but none of them of the class of the steerage emigrants

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who have come to America in our generation. And as the country has been in constant communication with the old world ever since, the American people are really in no special sense 'younger' or different except that in the last decade its population has become racially rather mixed, and sudden prosperity has thrust some very crude or 'young' types into prominence."

"In that sense," Edith Wickham added, "the country really is younger than it used to be."

Madame La Vallière was ready at once with her positiveness. "But no, Madame la Contesse, surely you, who have seen the best society of the Continent, know better than that. You know that your people are totally ignorant of art, that your millionaires have their beautiful *objets d'art* purchased for them by others —" The Greek woman's eyes glittered, spots of color showed under the paint on her high cheek bones.

Nina's soft reply was utterly free from the heat of the other woman's retort. "But how many of the nobility of Europe are critics of art, madame? I think there is little difference in that respect. It is true that the majority of our newly-made millionaires show their business acumen by trusting to specialists the beautifying of their homes. But the new millionaire, after all, is just one type of American. He does not represent the entire nation."

"Well — I *hope* not," the Greek woman returned with asperity, "for they are the laughing-stock of Paris."

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The countess gave her a quiet look. "My husband and I spend a great deal of time in Paris. We must have a little talk after lunch. No doubt we have many friends in common."

"But wasn't it funny, dear," Mildred afterwards complained to Percy; "she wouldn't go to talk with Nina at all. I was quite insistent but she refused point-blank and said she had to go."

"Which was no doubt the case, my dear," Percy assured her. "Madame La Vallière is very much in demand socially." And Mildred did not voice her reflection that she never met the much-sought lady at any house but Mrs. Wilmot's.

However, Madame La Vallière, whatever else she might be, proved herself a woman of spirit upon this occasion, and though the contessa may have restrained she had not subdued her. She continued to give forth her unfavorable impressions of the country whose guest she was in a lower voice to Mrs. Montague Smith. It was the club itself that now engaged her interest.

"It is quite European in its management, is it not, madame? You do not, I see, use that amusing collection of little dishes for the vegetables which is customary in America."

She received an unexpected answer from her not entirely submerged neighbor. "Little dishes for the vegetables?" Mrs. Montague Smith repeated. "Oh, yes, I think I know what you mean. But they are only used in the middle class hotels, madame. One meets

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with them sometimes on motor trips. But they are never used in American families."

"No! How I am mistaken!" exclaimed the madame, with a peculiar inflection and rising color. And after that Mrs. Montague Smith was compelled to listen to the list of the fashionable and desirable homes which Madame La Vallière had intimately visited.

It was in the sun parlor on the roof to which they had repaired for coffee that, embarked upon a dissertation on the unspeakable uncleanness of New York, she again obtained an audience. "When I first came here from Paris — which is so clean — so clean — that one might eat a meal upon the sidewalk — ah, I suffered so —" madame's pantomimic suggestion was that of one enduring exquisite tortures — "it seemed that I must take the next steamer home."

Mildred regretted that Bertha Rennels made a rude remark at that point. "Our streets *are* dreadful, it is true, madame, now that we have such a large lawless foreign population, and our laws are not enforced as they are in Europe. But it is, after all, a different idea of cleanness, isn't it? — or so it seemed to me the short time I lived there. Your idea of cleanness is municipal; ours is, let us say, personal."

There was a silence. "I do not think I understand you, mademoiselle," the Greek woman replied with ominous calmness.

"Oh — laundry, bath-tubs, fresh sheets and towels and things —" Bertha put it lightly aside with that.

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The countess continued in the same spirit. "Yes, that is the shock *we* get when we enter the hotel not designed for Americans! That is when we Americans want to take the first steamer home, is it not? Never shall I forget my first week at a French boarding-school *not* patronized by Americans!" She turned directly to the Greek guest. "We who live on the Continent, madame—" thus with her grace the countess seemed to share the implied responsibility for the condition criticized, "must admit that except in the case of the most aristocratic and traveled families, Continental ideas of hygiene are those of the middle ages. It is changing in Germany, it is true, under the influence of American ideas, but even there the bath when it exists is seldom used in a German home because of the expense of heating the water, and of course an economy unbelievable to the American is practised in the matter of bed and table linen in all homes and native hotels on the Continent."

Before the flushed critic of America could frame a reply to this unwelcome presentation of the facts, Mrs. Wilmot rose with her soft smile from her seat beside the countess and exclaimed, "Madame La Vallière, you and the countess must have a *real* talk together." She laid a persuasive hand upon the reluctant arm of the Greek woman. "Countess Varesca tells me that she knows many Greeks both in Paris and Athens. You will find that you have a number of friends in common, I am sure."

But Madame La Vallière did not move to accept the

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proffered seat. "Really you know I am not Greek but Turkish," was her unexpected answer. Her hostess looked up in surprise. "I was born in Constantinople," madame added, "but do not let me draw you from your group, Mrs. Wilmot, for to-day I may not remain."

Mrs. Wilmot, after that disappointing announcement, did not return to the guest of honor but stood hanging upon the Greek-or-Turkish lady's pungent utterances which, however acrid, seemed to thrill her listener with a sense of their daring originality. Madame La Vallière in her turn devoted herself to Mrs. Wilmot with the air of an offended child emphasizing her disapproval of one companion by her devotion to another.

Mrs. Montague Smith and Bertha Rennels were comparing their impressions of the latest Slavic "novelty" of the opera-house who had made her début the night before. Mildred was talking with Edith Wickham. Fair Randolph slipped into the vacant seat by the countess.

"Which Mrs. Wilmot is it?" Nina asked her old friend, indicating the enthralled lady whose smooth bird-like prettiness had only at moments of concentration or rebuff the predatory suggestion.

"Mrs. Lawrence Wilmot," Fair explained. "Surely you remember Larry. You used to say he looked like Lancelot or Elaine, Ah forget which."

Nina laughed. "Of course I remember Larry. He was of the generation preceding mine. He married just after I left America, and I felt very tragic about it. I don't remember ever seeing her. Who was she?"

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"Somebody from somewhere else. Nobody in town knew her. He met her at Bar Harbor. She made quite a hit at first, was hailed as a beauty, became haughty and exclusive, had her picture in the paper wearin' a pearl collar — but now she seems to have taken up the arts. Last time Ah went to one of her teas there were two girls around without their hats—" Fair paused and shook her head. "They *may* have been vestal virgins and Roman matrons — but they looked like the Gaieties and Follies of nineteen forty-six to me! You certainly do see funny people around town these days! Mr. Loring says it's like Rome or Babylon, Ah forget which, before the fall."

"Either will do," Nina agreed.

"Ah say it's all right to ask really truly celebrities to your house if you want to and can get 'em," Fair went on, "even if they were janitor's wives and pawnbroker's daughters before they leapt into the limelight. But this askin' every Tom, Dick an' Harry that's tried to paint a picture or get behind the footlights is overdoin' a little — or so it seems to me."

"Perhaps Mrs. Wilmot is trying to get them into the limelight. Nina considered the subject of their conversation a moment. "She has a very encouraging manner."

"May *be*." Fair had the negligent manner of the frankly non-altruistic. "They're makin' the most of *her* in any case. But Maud is shrewd underneath, if she can't tell glitter from gold. Her favorites don't last

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long. When they forget to be grateful, and show the anxious claw—" Fair illustrated; "thumbs down." Fair, having exhausted the possibilities of that topic of interest for the moment, started another.

"Well, what did you think of Willy Wright, the boy Ah took to Mildred's Sunday?"

"Willy isn't quite versed in the psychology of the soft hat yet," Fair went on. "Of course men who aren't Southerners or Westerners or Hebrews wear them all kinds of times now, but Willy *will* wear one with his evenin' coat, which is rather tryin' to the sensibilities."

"I don't think I had got as far as his hats," was Nina's amused rejoinder, "but I *have* noticed a poisonous variety of soft hat on the streets here,—of a queer greenish color, too large for the head, a sort of caricatured German effect. And odious pompadours on the young men. Are they all as foreign as they look, or is it just a fashion?"

"Oh, Ah reckon half of 'em really are foreign," returned Fair easily, "and those that aren't apparently try to look so. If they knew how hard it makes it for us to tell 'em from clerks and bar-keepers they would have a second thought before they bought 'em. It takes a real Vere de Vere type of man to stand up against a pompadour an' soft hat." Fair laughed, as she always did at her own comments. "Talk about men bein' *vain*. *Ah* say they must be as modest as violets or they would never wear some of the outrageous things that tailors and hatters force on 'em—the pore innocent souls!"

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Then, having endured generalizations for as long a time as was possible to one of her exclusively personal interest, Fair returned to her original subject. "Soft hat or no soft hat, Willy Wright can have almost any girl in *this* town. His father has oodles of money, you know. He didn't send the boy East to college, so he is still rather a pure product, but he knows which fork to use at dinner — and that's about all anyone asks of anybody in this town if they have money enough."

"He isn't just the type of young man we used to be romantic about," Nina remarked, "but he seems a nice, clean boy."

"Of co'se not," returned Fair placidly. "Times have changed. You ought to see the men that girls put up with nowadays. Ah saw one talking with a little undersized boy the other day at the country club who was actually *sittin' down* while she was standin' beside him! And when he got up and walked away — which he did without even excusin' himself, he was actually *whistlin'*. And she was a right pretty girl, too. But Willy Wright isn't like that. He is what mother calls one of nature's noblemen. Ah might take him myself," the blithe Fair, although supposedly not eligible, seemed to toy with the thought, "but Ah don't like to be accused of cradle snatchin'. He took a great fancy to Mildred that day. A pity really —" Whether from motives of delicacy or because a new thought had usurped its place, Fair left that reflection unfinished. "My dear!" she clutched her friend's hand in her excitement, "Ah've been dyin' to

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ask you — how *did* Jane Worthing get in that day? What happened? Ah never *did* expect to be thrown right face to face with her like that! Awfully embarrassin'. What was Mildred thinkin' of to have her there?'

"Why embarrassing?" Nina asked, after a short silence in which Fair curiously waited for her answer. "Jane came to see Mr. Loring about the illustrations for his book, I believe. She didn't expect to find a tea-party."

"Was *that* her excuse? If Ah was Mildred Ah'd keep an eye on giddy illustrators —" But Fair did not get a chance to finish.

"Fair, you can say such a thing — you who have known poor Janie so well!"

Fair's eyes slipped from the other woman's direct gaze, but she answered with her accustomed serenity, "Well, Ah never was so crazy about Jane, you know, Nina. Queer little mouse. You never knew just where she was at."

"I thought you did not recognize her," Nina said. "You passed by as if you had not seen her."

Fairfax Randolph turned upon her companion with large eyes of the frankest astonishment. "Do you mean to say that you would *bow* to her just the same?"

Nina's tone was light and without emphasis. "Why not? You would bow to the man, wouldn't you?"

"Of co'se. That's different."

"How?"

Fair glanced at her companion. It was a look which

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accented the lack of space between the eyes. "Oh, come now, Nina, don't you put on those airs of European broadness with *me*. Ah knew you in old U. S. *You* know why it's different just as well as Ah do. You're just puttin' on that foreign tone."

Nina disregarded this personal turn. "I shouldn't dream of cutting Jane Worthing," she said, "even if her motives had been purely selfish. She has paid the price and is paying it every day and hour, I suppose, poor child. It is always the woman that pays."

"Well, if a woman sins she must expect to pay the price."

"I do not call what Jane has done sinning, only — from the worldly standpoint — very unwise. She has wronged no one but herself."

Fairfax Randolph shook her head. "Well, Ah must say you've got funny ideas of morality over there, not to call it wicked when a woman runs off with a man who isn't her husband!"

"It might be, of course. In that as in other things the wickedness lies in the selfishness, the sin against someone else — or so it seems to me."

"Bein' married or not is all one, eh?"

Nina smiled. "Well, in my mind morality is not a matter of a ring and a few words in a church — necessary as both are for the welfare of society."

Fair's eyes seemed to take on a slight cast. "You wouldn't dare talk like that if you hadn't married a count."

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Nina only smiled. Fair regarded her with attention. "Really, while we are on the subject, Ah'd like to know what you *would* call wicked."

"Must I give a personally revised list of the seven deadly sins off-hand," Nina laughed. "Well, I think it is 'wicked' to live a lie. I think it is wicked for a woman to give herself to a man she doesn't love whether she marries him or not —"

Fair's color had risen. "Upon ma word, you have learned plain speakin' over there! Spare ma blushes, Nina."

Nina retorted lightly. "It's your fault — you asked for definitions. But really, you know, we are awfully out of date, talking about sins and wickedness. I feel like a Methodist parson. We have ethics instead of morals nowadays, don't we?"

Fair shook her head. "Guess you're gettin' out of ma depth, Nina. Ah never was intellectual, you know." Fair was frankly restive now and looked about for a change of companionship, just as Mildred, having bade farewell to her Greek-or-Turkish guest, opportunely came up with Mrs. Wilmot.

"I have a message for you from Percy," Mildred informed the relieved Fair, and Mrs. Wilmot sank down besides the countess with her soft, invariable smile, fixing her birdlike eyes upon the other's face.

"And I *must* have a few minutes with the contessa before I fly away." The metaphor struck the contessa as singularly apposite. Mrs. Wilmot wanted to give ex-

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pression to her emotions on the subject of Schoenberg and the modern German school, unaware that they represented a somewhat imperfect digest of a "stimulating" lecture she had heard on the subject the week before. Her conversation was as much of a disappointment to the club footman, who evidently understood his duties to be those of the sentry-on-watch, as the contessa's sociological discussion with Griscom had been to the elevator boy. Therefore he changed his beat so as to comprehend a couple on a divan at the further end of the room whose low-voiced conversation seemed to promise the confiding of a secret.

"Is he part of the German spy system?" inquired Nina, with an amused glance at the departing form in livery.

"Or just an ordinary New York-spoiled servant who has parted with his veneer,—question," laughed Bertha.

"Can the public servant be expected to retain his manners in a democracy?" Mrs. Wilmot pensively propounded.

"It's not his interest in my conversation I object to," laughed Nina, "it's his feeling at perfect liberty to show it! Perhaps the democracy *is* to blame. France certainly changed her manners for the worse under its influence."

"But isn't it always the people new to democracy that spoil under its influence," suggested Bertha who, it occurred to Nina Varesca, had a way of laying her unobtrusive finger on the spot.

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"Delightful personality, the countess," Mrs. Wilmot informed Mrs. Montague Smith and Fair Randolph in the elevator. Madame La Vallière too," Mrs. Wilmot raised softly appealing eyes, "another fascinating creature."

"Delightful!" agreed the conscienceless Fair and Mrs. Montague Smith murmured, "But quite relentlessly frank, is she not!"

The elevator had reached the ground floor. "Yes, I think her frankness is one of her most piquant qualities," Mrs. Wilmot agreed as she bowed farewell.

The eyes of her late companions met. "Is the piquant lady then one of Maud Wilmot's discoveries?" inquired Mrs. Montague Smith. Fair, the authority upon all such matters, nodded. "I might have known it," mused Mrs. Montague Smith. She looked up with an air of conviction. "I am *sure* she is the dressmaker that spoiled a gown for me in Paris last spring and kept nearly a yard of my ermine."

"And *Ah* know she is a milliner Ah almost had a lawsuit with last winter," declared Fair Randolph. Then they both laughed and parted, to go their different ways.

When the last guest had departed Mildred carried her cousin off with her in her car.

"You like Bertha Rennels, don't you, Nina?" she remarked in the course of her conscientious review of the festivity.

"Yes, indeed; the child has a delightful mind, fresh,

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whimsical, and yet thoughtful. I don't know when I have liked a woman so much."

"I am so glad I asked her. Percy didn't want me to at first —" Mildred's loyalty caused her to regret the moment after that she had let it slip out.

"But why?"

Mildred flushed. "Why, he had an idea that she might not feel quite at ease with the rest of us."

"Bertha Rennels? Why shouldn't she feel at ease?"

Mildred hesitated uncomfortably. "What I think Percy meant was that she wouldn't have the right clothes. He spoke of her looking shabby Sunday. She *did* have on her last year's suit, poor child, and a department-store hat, but I am sure she looked all right."

"Percy should see some of the Italian nobility," Nina remarked. "A department-store hat like Bertha's would be undreamed of style for them. Yet I never heard anyone suggest that they be excluded from social gatherings. Have New York standards really become as shoddy as that?"

"I don't know about shoddy." Poor Mildred by now looked thoroughly distressed. "But clothes do seem to make an odious, wrong, unjust difference somehow."

"Especially in New York, perhaps," Nina suggested, after a quick glance at her cousin's face. "For here the humblest little *ouvreuse* is fashionably dressed, and the hatless emigrant, I observe, wears a this season's coat. Therefore last year's garments make one a marked figure,

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and anything conspicuous is distressing to the sensitive. Is that it?"

"Perhaps," agreed Mildred uncomfortably.

The countess said no more, although she marvelled that the great author should concern himself with Bertha Ren-nels' last year's suit.

CHAPTER VIII

After their escape from crowded Fifth Avenue into the dingy but clearer spaces of Seventh, their car swept swiftly through the curved roads of the Park and out to Riverside Drive, where the river lay blue as indigo under a cloudless March sky.

The countess looked about her in amazement. "Why, it used to be houses and open land here! Only fifteen years, and all these great apartments have been built."

Mildred explained. "Fashion deserted it, you know, almost as soon as it decided to try it. It is mostly filled — at least the apartment houses are — with the newly-prosperous foreign element now — so an architect told me."

"Funny old Victorian Claremont!" Nina exclaimed, as they passed the low, white wooden building. "How innocent it looks among all these huge stone structures. We used to think it was a real drive when we came out here with the dear old horses."

In a small space of time they had reached the limit of the Drive and after a detour embracing the half built-up half tumble-down regions that were once the rural outskirts of the city, returned to Mildred's house for tea.

They found the author in the library rereading one of his own works by the aid of a green-shaded lamp. He sprang up with alacrity to greet them.

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"Fair ladies," Percy marked his address with a low bow. "Home at last from your festivities? Was it a ladies' battle, or a love feast, perchance?" This graceful question not drawing forth an immediate response, Percy turned a direct attention upon the countess: "I am sure our cousin enjoyed at least *one* guest."

To which Nina seating herself responded with her smile, "I enjoyed them all."

"But most of all, I am sure," the author pursued earnestly, "that distinguished woman of the world, Madame La Vallière. She, of course, being one of the society you have left, must be therefore a more familiar type to you now."

Nina laid aside her wrap — for she found the American room warm — "Yes, to one acquainted with Paris she is, as you say, a familiar type." The countess' tone was even — indeed had it contained any hint of allusiveness it is unlikely that her hearers would have detected it. But it chanced that Mildred, her own doubts on the subject of her alien guest not being as yet dispelled, had decided to question her more experienced cousin on the subject.

"*Did* you like Madame La Vallière, Nina?" To Mildred most discriminations and judgments, except moral ones, were resolved into this childish formula.

"I hardly talked with her, dear child."

"You heard what she said about being Turkish," Mildred pursued. "When she has always said before that she was Greek. What do you think she really is?"

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The author, not ordinarily quick to catch indirect conversation — Mildred attributed it to his absorption in weightier matters — did not hear this question. He was engaged for the moment in replacing his book in one of the cases containing glass doors. His most prized books were not trusted to the open shelves — for who could tell when the unscrupulous reporter might appropriate one containing his priceless autograph, mused Percy, who was fond of seeing any representative of the press who could be induced to call in his library.

“My uninformed impression would have been that Madame La Vallière was French by birth as well as marriage,” Nina answered. “But it is easy to be mistaken in one’s superficial impressions.”

“I remember I had a French teacher who used to attack everything American,” Mildred recalled. “But I didn’t think the aristocratic French people were like that.”

“I have never met any that were,” Nina admitted. “The manners of the French people I have been fortunate enough to meet were the last word of finish and exquisite formal courtesy. But French people of that class practically never come to America and are seldom met by Americans. I never knew them until my marriage. That aggressiveness I should say is very middle class. I have noticed that such people show it especially toward our country which has given them a prosperity and a recognition they could never have had at home.”

“Then you think she isn’t what she represents herself

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to be —" Mildred began to look a little frightened. "Do you mean that you think she is an *adventuress*?"

Nina laughed. "Nothing so romantic. I imagine she is, at worst, a pension-keeper or something of that sort. What you call a business woman. We Americans are very hospitable, are we not, and don't ask many questions about our foreign visitors."

Percy, having closed the bookcase door reverently upon his treasure, returned to the conversation.

"Well, it is an interesting club, is it not, Nina? It must be a revelation to you. You don't have women's clubs like that in Italy."

Nina smiled. "No, indeed, I don't think an Italian woman would know what to do in one. My only previous acquaintance with women's clubs was in London."

Percy's face became grave. He had forgotten the London clubs, and that fact was annoying, but he remembered something derogatory he had heard about them. "Ah, yes, and they have the same unwise license that is, I regret to say, permitted in this club! I was more than half inclined to have Mildred resign when I discovered it."

Finding his listeners attentive, Percy continued, enunciating with a refined distaste that exaggerated the movement of his small lips: "The women smoke."

"Oh, yes, I saw a few women smoking." — The countess' tone was unbelievably casual. — "But that is so usual nowadays —"

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She noticed after she had spoken that Mildred's large eyes were wide with disapproval. The author pounced upon her accusatively. "Ah, charming contessa, I believe *you* are guilty!"

"Of smoking? Why, yes, when courtesy seems to demand it. I think it is rather a bore and I don't altogether like the smell of it, but I don't see any reason why a woman shouldn't smoke if she wants to."

The maid entering with a note and a message for her mistress prevented Mildred from hearing this lax expression of opinion. But Percy could be trusted not to leave the unregenerate countess unreprieved.

"If contessas and marchesas are going to advance such opinions, how can we hope to influence women of less position against these vulgar tendencies!" he exclaimed sadly.

The countess did not take up this vital point. Instead she answered with what the author considered reprehensible frivolity, "*Contesse* and *marchese*, Mr. Loring. I cannot have a distinguished American *littérateur* treat my adopted language with such indifference."

Mildred asked to be excused a moment. Percy, his glasses intent upon the face of the countess, neglected to give his wife the formal permission which his fastidious taste exacted of him upon such occasions. "The contessa is loyal to her adopted country," he mused. "It is a gracious loyalty. Yet I wonder if she were to tell the whole truth—" he paused there portentously so long that the countess took him up with her lightness.

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"The whole truth. That is rather a large order, is it not?"

Percy continued with a measured gravity, "And the Latin sense of truth is not an austere one, I believe. You may have taken on a bit of Latin psychology with your loyalty. So perhaps I cannot expect a candid answer."

The countess did not seem to give these profound reflections quite the consideration they merited. "I suppose the Latin sense of truth is more indirect than the principle we are brought up to." Her tone was negligent, but as she met the author's deep gaze she asked him, a little suddenly, "Just what is your idea of the truth, I wonder!"

Percy was taken aback. "The truth — why — er — a — the truth is the truth. 'To thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day, you cannot then be false' —"

The contessa interrupted the peroration: "Being true to yourself then involves being true to other people?"

"Ah, you are subtle, you are subtle. I see. You are thinking of the many moods, the many selves — how to be true to *all* —" Percy waved his hand with vague expressiveness, "and yet *be* true."

"I am waiting for your definition."

"My definition —" Percy's tone was of touching simplicity. "I have no epigrammatic definition. I have only my severe, homely old-fashioned ideal of truth."

"The Puritan ideal." The author's gentle sideways

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inclination of the head signified his acquiescence. "And you do not find it too exacting? You think there is no danger of its inducing — hypocrisy?"

Percy stared, then laughed. "Jove, what a fascinating woman you are."

Nina made a faint movement of withdrawal. "Your compliments are — unmistakable, Mr. Loring."

He considered her with a ponderous intensity.

"Do you prefer them indirect — like the Continental sense of truth?"

"Alas, compliments and the truth are not necessarily synonymous. In compliments our taste is certainly for the indirect."

Percy Loring looked her over. Some indefinable accent of expression slanted her eyelids, yet her face was as unrevealing as a bronze Kwannon. Unobservant as he was of subtleties, the sense of her charm and her elusiveness penetrated him more deeply. His eyes clung to her face as he spoke.

"Now I am going to ask *you* a question. But will you answer it truthfully?"

"I may not answer it at all."

Percy pursued undaunted. "Does your husband never tell you an untruth?"

"Your questions are as direct as your compliments."

"You are evasive."

"I should not want to make it necessary."

Percy Loring threw back his head and laughed. "A clever answer. I wonder how he would like it."

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"Oh, Mario knows that I am no idealist. It is the secret of our domestic harmony. The Latin, you know, feels that woman is too frail and tender an object to be allowed to face life as it is."

"Then you admit that he might tell you an untruth."

"That depends upon your definition of truth." She considered him a moment before she answered with her impersonal lack of emphasis. "The fact is not always the truth, isn't that so? With some of us mutual understanding takes the place of a literal explicitness perhaps."

A peculiar expression came into Percy Loring's face. He glanced toward the door and spoke in a lowered voice. "Is mutual understanding synonymous with absolute loyalty, fidelity, in your creed of life?"

As Nina made no immediate reply to this the author inferred her answer. "Ah, I see you believe in giving him plenty of rope!" The tone in one less dignified might almost have been called rakish. Then he noticed that the contessa had risen to examine the most familiar of modern masterpieces, and his features contracted unpleasantly. He rose also and joined her. "Whistler's portrait of his mother," he explained, and drew no inference from the flicker of amusement in her face. He returned heavily to his subject. "The discussion interests me, you see. Our American ideals are so different."

"Oh, the American ideals," her tone changed — "they are noble and fine. I respect them more than I can say."

Percy's face took on its profound expression. "But

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"You mean you had imagined it as lacking the romantic element." He nodded. "Unchivalrous person! I am sure I never gave you any such impression. I don't think we spoke much of Mario."

"Perhaps that was it."

"I don't remember that we said much anyway. We sort of thought into each other's minds." Nothing could have been lighter than her manner of saying it. "It was somehow too silent up there to say much."

He moved again. His hand gripped the back of the green seat. "You are in love with him?" he said abruptly.

She started ever so slightly. "In love—" she repeated his phrase after a moment; "that expresses a phase rather than an established condition, doesn't it?" He did not answer and she went on easily, "You must admit that your question is an unusual one—conventionally considered. Yet how foolish we are about such things! More marriages are made without love than with it, and we often cordially detest the members of our own families, yet it is an unwritten law not to admit it."

He took it up directly but without awkwardness. "It was a *gauche*, an inadmissible question. Don't answer it."

"Not at all. It was a personal one, but I permit you that. Of course nothing is more natural than that you should suppose Mario and I to have contracted an ordinary businesslike international marriage."

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"But it wasn't —" he persisted in a low voice.

"It — wasn't, no. I hadn't any money — at least not any worth mentioning, while Mario was quite rich for an Italian. I thought he was Romeo and Paolo and Tristan in one and he was threatening twice a day to blow his brains out if I wouldn't marry him."

There was a long silence. He was bending forward now, his hands clasped between his knees, his gaze upon the floor. "Forgive my bad manners," he said at last. "It was just that I hadn't realized — until I saw you together the other day. I knew you belonged to a mortal prince —" his tone became more light — "but you see to me you have always been a sort of being from cloudland with an elfin child — you both used to dress in white. I still think of you with Mont Blanc in the distance. It is difficult to adjust myself to this — more conventional meeting on another plane so to speak."

She rose. He caught the uncertain glimmer of her smile.

"Disillusionment in the valleys?"

"No, never disillusionment."

"Never! You say it as confidently as an Italian."

"There are a few things in this world that one feels reasonably confident about." He followed her back to the library.

At the door she turned. "When are you coming to see us?"

"I hardly know. I may go to Turkey or somewhere thereabouts any day."

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"To Turkey! You casual person! Why didn't you say so before? Will you be gone long?"

"That is as Allah and *The Leader* will."

"*The Leader* . . . Oh, yes, you mean you are going as war correspondent." He nodded. "But you don't know when —"

He shook his head. "Probably not for two or three weeks. Possibly on the next steamer."

"How calmly you take it! Do you take everything like that?"

"I have only just decided to accept their offer. I didn't want to go. Belgium was almost more than I could stand — to see that inquisition going on and not to be able to help."

"And almost any day my poor Italy may be drawn in," she exclaimed. "When will it ever end!"

"God knows."

A thought struck her sharply. "But it is dangerous, very dangerous to go there now."

"Oh, as to that —" he set it carelessly aside. "You remember what Mark Twain said — that bed was the most dangerous place in the world, that more people died there than anywhere else."

She laughed, but her face became grave again immediately. "But I will see you again before you go —" then as he did not answer at once she added compellingly, though lightly, "Promise —"

Their eyes met. Something rushed over his face, swift, uncontrollable, — a look that stabbed her with some

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keen shock, whether of pain or joy she hardly knew. He half turned from her and looked out the window. "I promise," he said.

Mildred's voice coming toward them from the other room broke the silence.

"I thought I would *never* get rid of that cabinet-maker. He is a German and he certainly is *thorough*. Nina, you are not going! Mr. Griscom, can't you make her stay?"

Griscom's smile included them both. "Unfortunately, I have no power to control the contessa's comings and goings," he said.

Then the distinguished author entered in time to escort his titled guest with stately expressions of regret to the hall door.

CHAPTER IX

It had been the intention of the Count and Countess Varesca to return to Italy as soon as the legal matter which had brought them to America was concluded. But the proceedings had moved with that deliberation which is the pride of lawyers and the despair of the business-man. The count, inured to the indirect and leisurely ways of his country, was "resigned" and refused to put those point-blank questions answerable by "yes" and "no" so repugnant to the legal sensibilities. The contessa, however, by femininely diplomatic methods surprised the solemn representative of the law out of his ponderous many-syllabled technicalities into the admission that the matter could not possibly be adjusted in less than three months.

To Nina, separated from her youngest child, this delay was disturbing. "One must resign one's self," said the count, "*patienza — contentarsi*," and Nina, despite her inborn American tendency to regard Italian resignation as a doubtful virtue and to reject the old world habit of substituting endurance for the attempt at betterment, was obliged to admit that this was one of the cases in which resignation must be practised.

From the first week of their arrival they had found

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themselves overwhelmed with invitations. It was Nina Varesca's habit in the ordering of her social and personal life to consider first her husband's plans and wishes. So now in her own environment as in Italy, she accepted the invitations that interested Mario. Only when his fancy led him in directions where she was neither inclined (nor expected) to follow did she make her own choice.

They had been in America three weeks when they accepted Mrs. Montague Smith's invitation to spend the week-end at her Long Island country place. The weather proved to be clear and mild when the day arrived, with that alluring softness of spring in the air usually followed in our climate by a swift and sharp return to winter.

The motor trip with some old friends, the Crestons, was delightful once the dingy disorder of Long Island City and its outlying districts was left behind. Nina, long accustomed to the atmosphere of beauty and space, found herself grateful for release from the ugly and jarring contacts of the city.

Lloyd Creston and his Boston wife proved sympathetic companions. Creston was a lean, keen-eyed, eager type. His wife, whose straight hair was parted in unmitigated plainness above a severe fresh-colored face, concealed the kindly incisive humor of New England beneath the inherited austerity of its mask. Creston was Percy Loring's publisher. Nina wondered what he thought of his remunerative author.

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Mrs. Montague Smith's place had a very real, though largely created charm. Incorporating an old house, she had achieved with the assistance of a woman decorator versed in "period work," a fairly successful Colonial reproduction within as well as without. Against the background of her mahogany and white woodwork, Mrs. Smith's eighteenth century prettiness of the kind that suggests flowered brocades, and patches, was particularly effective. And if she had, as Fair Randolph suggested, been concerned principally with making a background for herself, it remained a restful background. Mrs. Montague Smith had achieved a reputation for the successful house party — not an easy task in a land where household organization is an imperfect machine and the social system mixed without piquancy. Upon the discriminating selection of her guests, Mrs. Monty Smith prided herself, and no doubt the excellence of her cook and the number of outdoor resources her place provided contributed their share to the success of her week-ends. Her ability to engineer her large household being inherited, was innate; and it moved therefore, unlike the establishments of the recently sophisticated, almost with the noiseless ease of an English household.

Mrs. Montague Smith described her tastes as "catholic," which meant that she conscientiously informed herself concerning the latest phases of the arts. But since in spite of this theory she was inherently conservative, she escaped the social accidents that from time to time befell the less discriminating Maud Wilmot.

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Upon the occasion of this particular house party, however, there had been a few mishaps, and while the con-
tessa was enjoying her tea in her boudoir, her hostess in a Dresden negligé craved admission in order to present a sort of scenario of the situation.

"To begin with, my dear," Mrs. Montague Smith recounted when placed against the right background with cushions, "I must apologize and disclaim responsibility for this little Lois Borg. She invited herself in a way impossible to deflect. I was — simply trapped — an accident that seldom befalls me. But underbred people can use ways and means rather difficult to combat I find — barbarian tactics, I call them. You see Lois' stepmother was Monty's cousin, a Kentucky beauty without a cent who married an impossible, outrageous Mr. Borg — some kind of a hyphenated American from St. Louis, I think — Lois was his daughter by his first wife, a person of his own class. The child has had every advantage, and this is her second season, but of her manners the least said the better. When I am mortified beyond expression at her behavior I remind myself that half the young girls in society now are like her — whether it is ignorance or crude social selfishness or affectation I am sure I don't know. I tell you, my dear, this revival of the courtesying and standing before elders of our grandmothers' day is all very well but I wish it went a little further *in*. Really I don't know what New York society is coming to! It is full of people from somewhere else — Pittsburg and the Western cities,

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and worse than that, plebeian foreigners who have made their money here, people with no position in their own country. Their daughters go to the exclusive schools and the first thing you know they are among the season's débutantes, and your daughters are writing their names down on their invitation lists."

Mrs. Montague Smith pensively asked for another cup of her own tea and resumed her recital. "There have been other unfortunate changes of cast, quite like an unlucky opera night. Instead of a delightful little Southern girl who tells the most enchanting darky stories I had to have that vapid little Dolly Whiton this week. Her mother is one of my very dear friends. How she happened to draw a little goose like Dolly for her only daughter Heaven only knows. Monty says she is like California fruit that looks pink and perfect outside, but hasn't any taste. And then there is Peggy, my niece, a perfect dear, but mad, my dear, mad as a hatter! She is an anarchist or something like that. Her mother made the mistake of letting her go to some socialist-ically-inclined college and she came home *rampant*. I always beg her not to advance her most startling theories before a mixed audience. She leads a most ascetic and useful life but advocates something that sounds very much like free love to me. Perhaps it isn't. I hope not. She is going to live in the tenements next winter. I didn't intend to ask her and that socialistic Endicott boy together. That was another accident. They have been off all afternoon talking like lobbyists — came home

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simply covered with mud and looking so happy I hadn't the heart to reproach them. I hope you won't mind them very much."

"Mind them! I shall be interested. You know it entertains me immensely to meet all these new types," Nina assured her apologetic hostess. "In Italy the people I meet are all so much alike!"

"Well, that is the extent of the incongruities," Mrs. Montague Smith smilingly dismissed them. "The others are intentional. There is Gilbert Barrington who was driven out of his wonderful Palermo villa by rumors of war. You will know him by his monochromic effect. *Life* had a lovely caricature of him years ago in one of his profound poses, called Etude in Black and White; of course, Whistler was still caviar to the multitude in those days. And Artie Paddock, a good-looking young architect, that Lois is angling for — hence her presence here. I don't think he takes the least interest in her, however. And Philip Horton — the George Hortons' second son. He is the one with political and other useful ambitions. In our grandmothers' time they were considered parvenu, but Heaven knows they are kings and queens in comparison with the new-rich of to-day. Philip is a nice lad, if he is a bit heavy. Oh, yes, Daniel Griscom is a possibility. He promised he would come up for Sunday if he could. I think I have mentioned all the women except the Polish princess who is rather trite and stuffy, especially for a Viennese but people like to meet her. Her portraits are just dreadful colored

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photographs, but being a titled personage she has trapped several innocents into ordering five-thousand-dollar portraits."

"New-rich innocents, I suppose," Nina suggested.

"Not at all," laughed Mrs. Montague Smith. "*They* are far too shrewd and careful in their purchases! The new ones go to Tiffany and other certified experts when they buy things. It is the good authentic old New Yorkers with their inherited convictions and relics of mid-Victorianism in their houses, who think they know just as much about art as anyone, that fall a prey to bad art!"

Mrs. Montague Smith rose with a sudden compunction. "Here I am talking you to death about people and things you don't know and perhaps don't want to hear about. I do hope you and Count Varesca won't let yourselves be bored. That is what I'm trying to say."

The countess quickly reassured her. "Oh, Mario is never bored when there are attractive girls around."

"My dear!" Mrs. Montague Smith reproached her. "He looks at you as if you were the only woman in the world!"

Nina laughed. "I think he feels that way sometimes. Italians are often quite picturesquely devoted to their wives, you know."

Mrs. Montague Smith, her romantic imagination aroused, lingered, her delicate ringed hand upon the flowered porcelain door knob. "But isn't he shockingly *jealous* sometimes, too?"

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"Perhaps, sometimes; more from a conscientious sense of the dramatic requirements of the situation than from a real Othello feeling about it, I fancy. You know Italians are essentially comfort-loving, really. They travel along the line of least resistance. If an emotion offends you — pluck it out and cast it from you — that is their philosophy. If trouble comes, '*Bisogna rassegnarsi.*'"

"What might that mean?"

"'One must resign oneself.'"

"Italians are not usually represented that way." Mrs. Montague Smith tried to readjust her romantic concept. "And I must say Count Varesca doesn't look like it to me."

"Well, Mario has a touch of *Meridionale.*"

"Translate again, please!" Mrs. Montague Smith was thoroughly enjoying herself. She had the taste, if not the talent of a fiction writer, and liked to build romances about "interesting" people.

"That is what they call Italians who come from the country south of Rome. Varesca's mother came from the South and the Southern Italians are supposed to be rather more volcanic."

"I see." Mrs. Montague Smith, her picture of the count somewhat restored to its original vividness by this last suggestion, took leave of the countess.

At dinner Nina met the guests described by her hostess. She found herself seated at the right of her host, a short, pink-cheeked grey-haired man who looked like

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a diminutive English squire and whose principal interests in life after his wife were his dogs and horses. On her host's left was the Polish princess. "So chinless," Peggy Long murmured in the sympathetic ear of her uncle after her introduction. "And so noseful," supplemented Monty Smith regretfully.

On Nina's other side was the young architect Arthur Paddock, a tall, good-looking, rather flavorless young man, who briefly disposing of the telephonic attentions of Lois Borg across the table devoted himself to the countess.

On the other side of the Polish princess was the enforcedly repatriated Barrington, black of beard and eye, who studied Nina from his point of vantage with the impersonal attention of the painter, and languidly talked with the noseful princess when Monty Smith was attending his more attractive neighbor.

On Mrs. Montague Smith's right was Mario, and on Mario's other side, Lois Borg. This arrangement, which had not been planned by their hostess, was another instance of the unforeseeable tactics of the imperfectly civilized. Somehow with the cooperation of foolish Dolly Whiton, Lois had again trapped her hostess whose intention it had been to barricade that frank young person with the two absorbed and therefore unsusceptible youths, Endicott and Horton and had achieved a seat opposite the object of her pursuit. And so it came about that the count had for one neighbor his hostess's least favored guest, while the harmless Dolly who was to

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have occupied her seat — for the experienced hostess suspected that the count's taste might, superficially speaking, run to California fruit despite the apparent, contradiction of his marriage — was left in a social *cul-de-sac* between the two ardent young theorists. They harangued away from or across Dolly, but never with her,—a disregard which was entirely unconscious and unintentional, since both were at heart the kindest of young men.

As for Lois be it said, this first triumphant manœuvre was her last public opportunity for what Mrs. Montague Smith called her "barbarian tactics." For, forced to an explicitness that she had only previously used in the engaging and dismissing of her servants, Lois's hostess gave her to understand that if she was to remain a member of the house party she must for this occasion at least conform. And Lois, no more embarrassed at the rebuke than a careless shop girl, had agreed with an off-hand, "All right."

The socialistic young Endicott, short, swarthy, aggressive, unobservant, in appearance suggesting the steppes of Russia rather than Plymouth Rock, devoted himself almost exclusively to Peggy, who was a healthy handsome young woman as hopeful, positive, and unperceptive as himself. Both were children of their generation, with their youthful sentiment directed into altruistic rather than personal channels. Endicott's special hobby was Roumanian emigrants and Peggy's the extermination of the White Slave traffic. Each, however,

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listened politely to the other. They were agreed in that both despised the class in which they were born, and were passionate champions of the downtrodden wage-earning aliens of the country. In what Monty Smith called their philanthropic frenzy they frequently forgot not only to accept or dismiss proffered dishes but also to eat them after acceptance. Endicott was quite unaware of Dolly Whiton's existence at his elbow, although Peggy occasionally included Creston, who had known her since she was a child. Peggy's other neighbor was Barrington, who loathed her type. Neither addressed half a dozen words to the other. Barrington wished that his seat had been next to the contessa, whose subtleties of line enchanted him. The contessa, for her part, wished that the devoted but unstimulating young Paddock might have been paired off with poor isolated Dolly Whiton, whose softly-tinted relaxed young face with its parted lips, raised eyebrows and slight unvarying smile was suggestive of a type of mind that should have proved sympathetic to his.

Barrington's eye noted Dolly in passing. "What an oddly unemphatic young face," he commented to his artistic neighbor, the princess. "You see? — All the lines faint, barely touched in. Not a decisive line or accent anywhere."

But the princess, whose idea of drawing was that of a patiently worked over map of the human features, naturally did not follow him. "Yes, a very delicate young type," she murmured.

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At that moment of her polite consideration she found the softly bright eyes of the delicate young type upon her. "Oh, are you *really* and *truly* a descendant of the Countess Walewska!" gushed Dolly across the table. The princess by a dignified inclination of the head acknowledged the relationship.

"Oh, I just *love* that story about the Countess Walewska and Napoleon," went on the enthusiastic Dolly, fresh from school and sweetly unaware of history's interpretation of that "story." "I just *adore* Napoleon, don't you?" she questioned the silent Barrington. "And Josephine, too! I just *love* Napoleon and Josephine, and I *hate* Marie Louise."

"Thoroughly correct sentiments," murmured Montague Smith in the pause that followed this enthusiastic outburst.

Dolly leaned back in a glow of satisfaction. Mario considered her with a brief hopefulness. The type was new to him, and at first glance he found the girl pretty, although after a moment's study his eye again wandered. While Philip Horton with an endless recital of deliberately enunciated statistics engaged his hostess' other ear, Mario reviewed the other women at the table, giving the matter his most serious consideration. There was the Polish woman whose conventional mannerisms and expressions of opinion were those of a type familiar to him. He regarded her as of no more interest, femininely speaking, than a marionette. Peggy Long talked too much and in spite of her good looks seemed to his Italian

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perceptions a trifle Amazonian. As for Mrs. Creston opposite, between the oblivious Endicott and the ceaselessly aware Paddock, she was almost middle-aged — or if she was not, her manner of dressing her hair made her look so. Also she was a woman, one could easily see, who had never had the faintest sense of coquetry. *Her* husband need never be jealous. Mario's attention returned to his sullen young neighbor, who, with her eyes either upon her intended conquest or fixed upon space, either ignored his conversational attempts or answered in monosyllables, and he decided that she was, after all, the most interesting feminine novelty that the occasion offered. The low dark brows over long blue eyes, the heavy red mouth seldom closed, with its promise of sullen passion, attracted him. Her short replies only served to increase his interest.

"Mademoiselle is bored," he observed suddenly in the midst of his sentence. "Alas, I have not the power to rouse her. Is it that she finds no one man worthy of her attention, or am I merely the *wrong* man?"

The girl gave him a momentary glimpse of a face unlightened by any touch of esprit. It was as if for the first time she saw him. She answered without smiling,

"Why do married men always begin to skate along the thin edge of a flirtation and the unmarried ones talk about boats and *aéroplanes* and the stock market?"

Her voice was deep and toneless without modulations, like an untrained boy's. But her weighty bluntness only

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amused the count. He had spent much of his life with light, smooth, responsive women who smiled.

"She has temperament, this young woman," he decided. "She might be interesting when roused."

"It is self-preservation, perhaps," he suggested, "that prompts the young man to talk aéroplanes. He dares not trust himself to talk of love to you. The personalities of love are dangerous topics; the flame kindles with tending." The count gesticulated delicately. "Who talks of love presently finds himself wondering what kind of a lover his charming young companion would make. Imagination gets to work, and presto the harm is done."

The girl gave him a steady look, scarcely bold, rather expressing the speculative curiosity of the natural being untrained to dissemble feeling. "You look as if you had some imagination along that line," she remarked with her slow heaviness at the conclusion of her deliberate glance, under which the count's eyes had become steadily more mischievous.

"May I confide to you my imaginings after dinner?"

"I've no objection."

Baldly, almost sullenly, she gave her consent. Yet the man so alien to her type found something provocative in her very rudeness. Even the peasants of his country had grace and lightness.

Nina from her seat on the opposite side of the table noted not without apprehension the signs of Mario's budding interest, apparent to her not only in his face

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but by the fact that he had not resented the frank absorption of her neighbor, the young architect, who was by this time well into the first stages of a pure hopeless passion for the countess. While she listened to young Paddock's correct conversation Nina considered the possibilities. Mario was accustomed to carrying his affairs to their logical conclusion. That, she knew, was not the expectation or understanding of the American girl. It was a case where each was playing an unfamiliar game. The girl, no doubt, was unaccustomed to Mario's type also. Very probably it might mean for her an unpleasant shock. Must she then in her own country for the first time break the silence of her married life and speak to Mario on this subject?

"But you can't hope to stamp prostitution out of the world—" Peggy's voice, clear and positive, broke into one of those silences that occur even at dinner parties (every twenty minutes, science or pseudo science tells us). "That is where you are illogical, my friend. You can only limit and reduce it." Peggy's young face, virginal, assured, was alight with the stimulation of unheated controversy. Young Endicott eagerly met her argument. Arthur Paddock gave an agonized glance at the countess, but, noting the unconsciousness of her face, decided with relief that she could not have heard.

"These modern girls that *will* conduct meetings for men only in our drawing-rooms," muttered Montague Smith wrathfully to Barrington across the princess, who looked as always suavely attentive. He cast a baleful

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glance at his wife's niece as he bent over his cook's most piquant specialty in salad. Peggy caught the glance and brief amusement softened by pity for poor old uncle swept over her face, not, however, for a moment drawing her aside from her radiant propaganda.

"The way to limit it is to give all of them — especially women — a living wage," she declared.

"But, my dear Peggy," Creston's cultured voice entered the conversation, tactfully guiding it away from the plague spot, "it is true that certain kinds of labor are underpaid even in this country but on the other hand most unskilled labor and a great deal of inefficient so-called skilled labor are absurdly overpaid by any rational standard of values. And when it comes to the Living Wage how about our professional classes? How about your young college friends starting out to take positions of the intellectual sort? Those men and women with sensibilities of refined people would count themselves rich on the rewards of many of your downtrodden wage-earners. Have you ever compared the earnings of a stage carpenter with those of the playwrights and the actors? Or of the editorial department of a magazine or publishing house with those of the frequently uneducated men in the business positions? I believe I am the only publisher in New York who does not pay his stenographer more than his feminine manuscript readers."

"They are all human beings," was Peggy's resolute retort. "Why should one have a better chance than the other?"

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Creston laughed. "Exactly, that's it. Why should your Slavic peasant born in a hut or a Ghetto, used to a life as simple as that of a dog in its kennel earn as much with his rude manual labor as the evolved man or woman engaged in intellectual work?"

"Don't insult my dogs, Creston," put in Monty Smith. "We had some Pollocks or Slovaks or *Wollaks*, whatever they were, working on the new road last year. And I assure you, the overseer's mongrel pup is a far more civilized person.

Peggy disregarded her harmless uncle for whose mental endowment she plainly had not the slightest respect, but she turned with her young fervor upon Creston. "Then we must *teach* them how to live, Mr. Creston!"

"That's the idea," echoed the altruist, Endicott.

Montague Smith protested. "Why spoil all their comfort in life!"

Creston shook his head. "We teach too much in this country. Let things have a chance to grow a bit. Your downtrodden peasant has the opportunity here to enlarge his own horizon in his own way. Why not let him,—so long as his customs don't give us typhoid? Perhaps it is a better way for him than ours. He earns more a day here doing unskilled labor as soon as he lands than he can earn in a month in his own country working six hours longer, and his living expenses are very little more here. He is exploited and cheated in the New World sometimes, but nearly always by his own

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people. Even cheated, he is incomparably better off here, for he frequently spends less than a fifth of his income."

Peggy's challenging eyes were those of a young Antigone.

"Would *we* like to change places with him, Mr. Creston, and live as he does?"

Creston laughed. "No, perhaps not. But if we don't like eight room-mates and polenta and he doesn't mind — he can get rich where the American workman can save nothing on the same wages. So after all why is he wronged?"

"Then let us overcome our fastidiousness and our taste for luxuries," was Peggy's noble if indirect answer.

"Let us abolish bath-rooms and live with the Germ," savagely interpolated Monty Smith, "or better still, let us inaugurate Slavic customs and wash their feet of a saint's day —"

"Really, Monty," exclaimed his wife, who had caught this fragment.

"It's my fault, auntie," explained Peggy blithely. "I began it."

"Go live with them, Peggy, and come back next year and tell us all about it." Creston laughingly abandoned the subject.

"But at the Y. M. C. A., please, not here," muttered her uncle.

At that point Mrs. Montague Smith rose, giving the sign for her guests and left the men, after the English

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fashion, who however, in the American fashion, soon rejoined them. The young architect immediately found the object of his devotion but was obliged to share her with Creston. The young reformers frankly retired to a corner where they continued their discussion in clouds of smoke. When Nina looked about for Mario and the girl, they had already disappeared.

"The Peggy child is amusing with her theories," Creston remarked, as he seated himself by the countess. "She has the sentimental concept of the worker with hands, and fits them all out with her own college psychology like so many of our would-be reformers."

"Just what is it that they are trying to do?" Nina questioned.

"I don't believe they know precisely," laughed Creston. "Sometimes it is something about strikes and eight-hour days and closing shops on Saturdays. Just now it is Americanizing the emigrant. Far better not to make a citizen of him, I think. That is half the trouble in this country — this sentimentalization of the alien, forcing citizenship on defectives and anarchists and the tools of foreign governments, most of them men who can't speak our language. Substitute deportation for citizenship, I say, and the atmosphere will be the clearer."

"The working people here seem fairly able to take care of themselves, judging from all that I have heard about the things that unions won't let people do," said Nina.

"Why, that is the one great idea of the employé class

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in this country, what they *won't* do! Didn't you know that? What they are supposed to *do* is a matter of no consideration whatever."

While Creston talked in his unemphasized, cultured voice young Arthur Paddock courteously listened and thought that to such a woman one should talk Walter Pater and Maeterlinck, not flippantly treated sociology. And Nina, while she attended and enjoyed Creston's conversation as she seldom enjoyed the conversation of the men she met in Italy, was conscious of an uneasy undercurrent of apprehension concerning Mario and Lois Borg.

Montague Smith, standing upon the threshold of the drawing-room, found his own grievance in the behavior of his wife's niece. He was fond of Peggy, but was unable to reconcile himself to many of her ways. He complained to his wife, who passed him, "Is Peggy going to spend the entire evening smoking like a smoke-stack?"

"Monty dear, Peggy never smokes more than two cigarettes. If you are talking of smoke-stacks, how about our princess?"

"I am not counting her weeds," fumed Monty Smith. "It's the *way* she does it. It isn't pretty. She smokes like a gawky college boy. The princess, nose, chin and all, smokes like a grande dame—if smoking may be said to be consistent with being a grande dame." The retrogressive Monty started to walk away.

"What pleasant group are you going to break up?" his wife halted him with her smile.

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"Creston wanted to see my old Dutch maps." The American husband ever docile at heart paused and waited. "But if you don't want me to make Artie Paddock happy by removing him I won't do it."

Mrs. Montague Smith glanced at the group in question. "Take them *both* off, Monty," she suggested, "and leave her with me."

When Montague Smith had obediently borne his two guests off to the cool roomy domain where his hobbies open and covert were housed, Mrs. Montague Smith sank down beside the countess.

"Well, how do you like young Paddock?" she asked in the frank manner of American hostesses, to which Nina, not quite accustomed to this directness, answered,

"He seems a charming young man, full of chivalry and ideals and the considerations."

Mrs. Montague Smith's eyes remained upon the countess a moment, then she laughed and briefly clasped her hand. "He *bored* you, my dear! Why not own it?"

Nina laughed also, finding the frankness refreshing. "Since you speak of it, he does perhaps lack the interesting angle. He is an American version of many of the men I meet at home. Let me try your rude painter next time. I liked his looks tremendously."

"When I have time I will tell you how much he likes yours—" The hostess, glancing toward the painter, saw him bend a sombre attention upon the enthusiastic Dolly, who seemed to be asking him something, per-

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haps concerning his favorite-wife-of-Napoleon. "Good Heavens, I must rescue him this minute!" she exclaimed. "He is one of the men who don't know how to save themselves." She contrived to catch Dolly's vaguely wandering eye, and softly called, "Come over here, both of you." After that it was a simple matter to bear off the acquiescent Dolly, leaving together as she stated it, "the painter and the paintable."

Mario's absence with Lois, although not long enough to attract general attention, was sufficiently noticeable to annoy his hostess and to disturb his wife.

"There is something very unpleasant about that little Lois," Mrs. Montague Smith complained to her husband at the end of the evening. "It isn't just that she is such a little bounder. Monty, I don't really think she is *nice*."

"We won't let her in any more," was Monty's typically masculine settlement of the matter. "After all, social life isn't a hold-up — at least it used not to be."

Nina also more hesitatingly broached the subject to her husband in the seclusion of their apartment.

"You know, Mario dear, you must not be misled by the freedom of girls in America, especially a not very well-bred girl like that little Lois Borg. You don't want to make an embarrassing mistake."

Mario whistled the waltz from "Bohème." "Have I not married an American girl?"

"*Verisimmo!* But one very differently brought up

CHAPTER X

But the next morning, despite her warning, Mario went riding with the *Orchacina*, while Nina played golf with Arthur Paddock against the *anarchisti*, who forgot their score in heated argument, and from time to time stood obliviously in the path of other golfers who were obliged to become loud in their wrath before the ardent young theorists could be induced to move on.

At lunch Nina found Griscom in Paddock's seat.

"How is the fairy prince?" he asked as he reseated himself after greeting her. She felt the question to be perfunctory.

"Still asking for Mr. Griscom," she told him.

Griscom looked hard at his plate. "Does he really remember? Or is it just an Italian figure of speech?"

"I do not use Italian figures of speech with my American friends. So far as I am able to remember it I use the dialect of my own country." He met her elusive smile.

Before he spoke again Barrington, substituted for Creston on her left, put in his claims, so it came about that Griscom talked with Mrs. Creston almost until the end of the meal.

The *anarchisti* had insisted upon having a sail-boat taken out of its winter quarters. They invited Nina and Griscom and the count — who was a trifle late for lunch

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as was also his companion of the morning. Nina and Griscom accepted, but the count, after professing the greatest appreciation, decided that having ridden all morning he must have a little walk in the afternoon.

The sail was as perfect as the *anarchisti* had ardently prophesied it would be, with just enough sea to save it from tameness. Nina realized afterwards in recalling it that no one had talked much. She was grateful to the young *anarchisti* for that. They might so easily have spoiled it with their insistent arguments. Seen thus, out-doors against the background of sea and sky, she realized their clean young strength and felt aware with some obscure pang of recognition of something that America — after all, her America — gave to youth.

Walking home from the boat landing in the middle of the afternoon Griscom and Nina got separated from the athletic two who strode on in advance of them. Left free to choose their own way by this accident, Griscom suggested a by-path through the pine woods.

Walking a little in advance of her at a sudden turn of the path he stopped abruptly and turned around, facing her. "It seems to grow a little rough beyond — perhaps we had better try the other path."

Her quick ear had caught sounds,— the crackling of a branch, a low exclamation in a woman's voice; and she would have turned back with him at once, but before she could do so two figures came into plain sight. It was Mario and Lois Borg.

A glance at the girl's flushed face told the story. Nina

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turned with a sick pang from the sight. Mario had not chosen to heed her warning then; she could only hope that the young creature would not now imagine herself in love. . . . Mario was an artist in love-making.

"Are you going back to the house too? Do we return a square party?" Nina put it so lightly that Griscom could only wonder if she had seen and understood.

"No," returned Lois, with her unsmiling baldness; "we are just starting out."

"No tea?" Nina questioned, graciously, without urgency.

Mario glanced at his companion, referring the decision to her. "I hate tea." Thus Lois briefly disposed of the suggestion.

"Then I hate it too," agreed Mario. He gave a flashing glance at his wife — what she called his naughty look. "If we get lost in the woods, please ask the birds to cover us —"

Nina and Griscom continued on their way to the house for a time in silence. As the afternoon grew late the chill of spring replaced the mid-day warmth, and they walked more quickly.

"What do you think the chances are of Italy's coming into the war?" she asked him at last.

"Who can tell? Any one of the remaining Powers may be drawn in any moment, so far as we know. My sister is in Paris doing relief work. She wants to go to Serbia and I have written begging her not to do it."

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"My youngest child is over there, you know. That thought rather keeps me awake at night."

He gave her a troubled look of sympathy, but made no comment. "For that reason I want to go home at once," she went on, "and my husband is quite ready to go too of course, but the settlement of my aunt's will keeps us. I have to stay here to sign papers and things."

"It seems almost a pity that you didn't bring him over here too. Then you could all have stayed until the war was over."

"Mario is so sure that Italy won't enter the war. And if it should—it would seem rather like deserting, wouldn't it, to stay in safety over here?"

"But there is nothing over there that you can do."

"Ah, plenty to do if I were capable of doing it!"

"The mother of future Italy ought not to risk her life for the more abstract issues."

She glanced up at him. It occurred to her that his face had not been so grave in the Alpine days. "That is a question," she said. "I have been thinking about it a good deal lately."

He turned to look at her. With the memory of the things he had seen in that war-violated country the thought of this woman in their midst was unendurable to him. "No question at all in my mind," he said. "Think once, of all the unmarried women in the world and childless widows aching to do something with their woman's hands, and no one at home really needing them. Give them the chance."

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Her next remark covered a swift flight of intervening thoughts. "Mario is exempt from service, under the Italian law, as he has two brothers in it, one in the army, the other in the reserves."

"Surely his household is contributing its share then." Some subtle prompting led her to return to the preceding subject.

"It did not seem wise to bring the baby over with me, and I have been glad since in a way that I did not. New York as I remembered it was undesirable enough for a young person of his age, but New York as it is, is impossible."

He glanced again at the woman that he had seen always self-possessed, always masked in her civilized habit of expression, saw the tender maternity in her face and turned from the sight.

"But if I had imagined how I was going to feel here without him, I — could not have done it." Nina's was a voice in which the undercurrent of emotion, however covered and controlled, was peculiarly communicative. At this moment its appeal was irresistible.

"You make me feel as if I must step into an aëroplane and abduct him to-night," Griscom said at last in a curious voice.

She smiled bravely if a little tremulously. "I wish you could!"

"Don't say things like that. You can't tell what I will do. I have an infinite capacity for the quixotic, you know."

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"You?" She gave him a brief glance that was more like the woman he knew. "I don't believe it."

"You don't know me very well." Again he turned away and looked at the grey uneventful stretch of the Sound.

"I want to." She said it simply without the faintest touch of coquetry or even of the personal accent, but she saw the sudden tightening of the muscles of his face.

"I am afraid it isn't possible for us to know each other better —"

"Why not?"

His answer came after another pause. "Well, for one reason — lack of present opportunity. I am going away. And for another — our homes are on opposite sides of the sea." He held aside an obstructive branch without meeting her eyes.

"When two people respect and, to an extent, understand each other, what difference need time and place make? We can *feel* friendship, can we not — you here and I there or vice versa?" She looked up at him fairly and frankly and after a moment he met her glance and smiled.

"There is nothing the matter with your hypothesis," he said.

"Don't reject my little advances. I have spoken to you about the *bambino*, because there seemed no one else to whom I could say it so well." Almost immediately she added, "Even my husband, who adores the baby, will only tell me '*Patienza*' and '*Contentarsi*.' That is the

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Italian way of meeting difficulties, you know. But I am not Italian, and if I can get him safely over here or myself over there without selfishness — well, I don't want to exercise Italian resignation if it isn't necessary, you see."

"I am afraid it is for the present. I wouldn't advise your sending for him just now. If I know you at all you would rather take the risk yourself — and there is a risk. There is no denying that."

"Oh, of course, of *course* I would!"

They had come to an opening cut to show a long vista of the water, and both had paused, leaning against the wood railing that protected the edge of a steep though not high sand bluff. His face in the clear light from sky and water looked pale and stern.

"I can't tell you how much I value what you have just said. I just want you to know that there is nothing humanly possible, *nothing* that I would not do for you — so tell me always, anything you are willing to. Some time — who knows — perhaps I might be able to help."

He caught a glimpse of her smile as she turned to walk on. "I knew you were my friend really," she said.

That night when she went down to dinner she found Creston in Griscom's place. Mrs. Montague Smith informed her that a telegram from town had called Griscom away. A summons to his work in the war zone, perhaps . . . the thought brought a sharp, sinking sensation about her heart. Anyway . . . he had promised to let

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her know. He would not go without seeing her again.

She became conscious that Barrington was waiting for her response, and realized that she had not the slightest idea what he had said.

CHAPTER XI

"I have always been an old foggy in one respect," Mrs. Montague Smith, radiant in her most youthful effect of pinkness and whiteness, declared. "I will *not* let people play cards for money in my house. I don't care *what* anyone else thinks or does, *I* think it is horrid and vulgar and I am proud of what Peggy calls my Victorianism."

The contessa remarked that Mrs. Montague Smith might do some Victorian missionary work among the impecunious young nobles of Southern Europe in that respect. She looked unaware, although she was not, of the spectacle of Lois dancing in the fashion of the cabaret with her husband.

"And if I am to be forced, at the point of the bayonet, to entertain this young Carmen," Mrs. Montague Smith indicated Lois with the slightest of glances, "I fear dancing will have to be taboo also."

They watched the girl staggering past in an ungraceful exaggeration of the bizarre dance of the hour. Her small body was bent slightly forward at the waist. When she walked it was with a side-to-side movement of the shoulders. When she danced it was with the same indifference to dignity or grace.

"I think I wouldn't mind Lois so much if she would

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sometimes close her mouth," remarked Mrs. Montague Smith, with sudden soft exasperation. "I notice it among so many of the young people now. Dolly Whiton is another. I have always considered it a hallmark of underbredness or lack of intellect or both, but I suppose it may equally well signify absence of will."

"Or presence of adenoids," suggested her husband who was lounging beside her.

His wife turned upon him. "It was *your* foolish clattering Cousin Matilda that let me in for Lois — she begged me to entertain the little aborigine her first winter out."

"I know." Monty Smith with melancholy grace accepted full responsibility. "*Everything* is my fault."

His wife regarded him with sparkling eyes and a play of dimples. "Of *course*." She turned to the countess. "That is why I am now breaking all the codes of decency by criticizing my own guest. But I don't really think —" she appealed prettily to husband and friend, "that I should be blamed *too much* for complaining of this young social highwayman, do you?" Without waiting for reassurance on this point she again addressed the countess: "Beware the opening wedge, my dear. With undesirables, firmness at the start is the main essential. But *you* don't need my advice. You live in a land of fixed boundaries where newcomers can't try to pick your lock or climb over your bars."

Nina laughed. "That too has its disadvantages. You have to endure what you don't like for life there."

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Here you have some chance to shut out the unwelcome guest."

With the cessation of the dance music the count contrived to shed the tenacious Lois and sought out his hostess. The monochromic Barrington strolled in and was allowed to monopolize the countess until young Paddock secured her for a dance. Mrs. Montague Smith, ruthlessly interrupting her husband's monologue on the gun-shy dog with the amiable Creston as audience, started a billiard game including Varesca. For the remainder of the evening barbarian tactics availed Lois little. The count remained subtly barricaded, inaccessible, although Lois' efforts to entrap him were made with such incredible frankness that Nina several times during the evening wondered whether the girl did not know any better or did not care. That Mario, although with all due regard for the formalities, was interested was also apparent, whether with the ephemeral Latin curiosity concerning the unfamiliar type, or whether embarked upon one of his brief adventures, she could not tell. But since it was a young girl, and one they had met at a friend's house she was troubled.

They were to return to town by train, as Mrs. Creston, bent upon a charitable journey to visit a rheumatic cousin in a sanitarium some thirty miles away, had kept the machine for her own use.

Mario who breakfasted in the dining-room with the other men found Lois already in her seat when he arrived. Peggy's austere contempt for a boudoir breakfast

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and Mrs. Creston's habit of early rising usually served to provide Lois with companions of her own sex, but upon this Monday morning Peggy's self-imposed conviction that she was "one of the workers" had impelled her to take an early train. Mrs. Creston had also taken an early start, so Lois was the only woman at the table. Her consequently unhandicapped attempts to sequester the count after breakfast were not successful however. The Latin's capacity for graceful social elusiveness was an unknown quantity to Lois, and her heavy little face betrayed the frankest bewilderment.

When Nina came down she found her husband listening with exquisite attentiveness to the artistic banalities of young Paddock in whose eyes as the chosen mate of his deity he was an object of melancholy interest.

"Was his the tragedy of too-lateness," young Paddock pensively wondered, "or was the count, this sensitive aristocratic product of an old race, a better man than he?" He found a noble sadness in this last thought.

Upon the verandah Lois bade Varesca as impressive a farewell as his lightness permitted, and Nina breathed a sigh of relief as they left the small slouching figure on the steps. She had noted, however, that Lois wore her riding habit and was scarcely surprised when glancing up from her conversation with Creston and Mario on the station platform she saw the girl approaching on horseback followed by a groom who helped her to dismount.

Mario, directly addressed, had no other recourse than

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to rejoin his pursuing enamorata had he desired to do otherwise, but the naughty gleam in his eye told his wife that the opportunity was not altogether unwelcome.

When Creston, detained by an acquaintance who passed him on the station platform, left her temporarily companionless, she gave herself to the attentions of a devoted collie who had accompanied her to the station at his own request. It was not until the arrival of the train that Mario, taking picturesque leave of his companion, rejoined his wife. Creston, whose chair was not near theirs, had that admirable discretion which prompts its possessor to leave the fortuitous fellow traveler alone.

"This train journey is so odious," remarked Nina as they took their chairs in the neighborhood of what seemed to be a traveling day nursery, but proved upon close examination to be two young children with their parents and a nurse whose social status seemed to be the same as that of the parents. "We made a mistake not to have our own motor for our stay in New York."

"But it is so stupidly expensive here," Mario returned with his frugality. "One could do more interesting things with one's money."

"I daresay that is the sensible way to think of it," Nina agreed, "but the traveling public is so obtrusive that it impels one to extravagance. Look at that mother — beaming with self-conscious pride over the zoological noise her little boy is making instead of being mortified over it as we should be! She evidently thinks roaring a unique and delightful gift."

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"Ah, well," Mario lightly put the responsibility where it belonged, "your America."

"Mario, I ask you — *look* at that woman and that man! Observe the angle of his hat and the length of his coat and the shortness of his legs! Do they look American?"

"No, I should say, judging from their appearance and the name they called the cub that roars the loudest, that they were Slavic-Austrians of some sort." Mario cast a glance, more of amusement than annoyance, at the lusty infants now wallowing on the floor of the aisle where passers-by had to step over them as best they could. "Nevertheless they live in your America, do they not? And travel in a drawing-room car, whereas in their own country it is clear they rolled about the floor of a third-class carriage. You do not require of them first-class manners. It is your fault. You ask them in and let them overrun you; so why complain?"

"And now their own friends and fellow-countrymen insist that we let them in, Mr. Creston tells me."

"What exciting conversations you have with your fellow-countrymen," mocked Mario.

She gave him one of her unrevealing glances. "You think that there is but one topic of interest between men and women, is it not so, *ragazzo*? Would you prefer that I talk to them of *amore ardente*?"

"No, *I* do not prefer it," returned Mario with his gaiety, "but I should think *you* might. Of what earthly interest is it who comes in or who goes out of your

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country? If we are comfortable and those we love are comfortable, *che vuoi?* Give to the poor and forget what cannot be helped. One cannot take the universe upon his shoulders."

Yes, truly in those words Mario had expressed his Latin philosophy of life. She leaned back, watching the low sandy landscape flying past. In what light had her husband's philandering appeared to Daniel Griscom? . . . He had revealed no consciousness except for that brief passing expression on his face when he would have saved her from seeing what he had seen in the pine woods.

That such episodes were too common to cause her any unhappiness might be difficult for him to imagine, believing as he did that she was happy with Mario . . . and indeed she had not been unhappy, not for many years. She turned to catch the reminiscent smile playing over his face. It was the smile of the conquering male, yet after all, supremely childlike, in spite of the mature emotions involved.

"And were you well amused, *Cativo?*" she asked him in Italian.

He flashed a quick look at her. "*Gelosia?*" he wondered. "Amused sufficiently, yes," he agreed.

"I should think the little Borg girl might be attractive from a man's standpoint," she suggested dispassionately.

He shot a quick look at her. "From a man's standpoint, yes; surely from no other. She has but one card to play, her sex. There is no illusion, no uncertainty. When she has laid her one card on the table she has no

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more to play." He stated the brutal fact with his careless lightness. But she met it with a seriousness she rarely showed to him.

"Mario, you know I do not often speak of these things. But I ask you again to remember that even if young girls here act as they could not, and probably would not, in your country, they are nevertheless young girls, not sophisticated signore; and you have met her at the house of a friend."

"I assure you," Mario blithely asserted, "that the *orchacina's* virtue is quite untouched! She is not quick with words, but she seems prepared to play what you call a rather hard game. You need, however, have no apprehensions. She is, as I told you, abundantly able to take care of herself. If I see her again, I promise you I will have all due regard to the conventions American. Do not look so serious. It is not like you."

"I wish, I admit, that fancy had led you in some other direction."

Mario gave his moustache an upward twist. "My dear, I will escape, I promise you, if she will let me!"

"Mario, she is an ignorant child whose emotions may have been touched for the first time by you."

"I understand that she is only playing with fire — you are not the only American girl I have known. Believe me, *carissima*, I understand better than you. She will withdraw at the danger-point and hope to leave me in torments — then I shall show her — *capisco?* It is a duel, if you like, as always, but not an especially exciting

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one. She can take care of herself, believe me. She is a being less fine than Assunta, so little worthy of your consideration that I do not altogether like to hear you discussing her."

Had Mario intended to pursue the subject further all conversation was now rendered impossible by the deafening din of the alien's largest child, whose screams apparently did not indicate a disturbed state of health so much as the natural untrammelled instinct of the primitive young to exercise its lungs. The baleful glances directed at the parents by the other occupants of the car had no effect upon them. They remained, if not unconscious, at least utterly unconcerned and made not the slightest attempt to subdue the vociferous infant. When the child had subsided temporarily breathless, neither Mario nor Nina made any attempt to renew the conversation. Mario, not especially disturbed by the vocalization of the young Austro-American, continued his smiling meditations and his wife watching him felt a sudden sharp inward revulsion from the whole situation. Oh, this inescapable consciousness of sex,—veiled sex, overt sex, sex infused through all the æsthetic sensibilities; but always, it seemed, without a touch of the spiritual vivification that, however briefly, penetrates and lifts the physical thing in the Anglo-Saxon. Even Mario's feeling for her, the woman who had evoked his deepest, most permanent feeling,—was it anything other than sex feeling in its most refined development? She had his respect—the gracious Latin form of respect for woman,—his

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affection, his loyalty. She knew his passion. She was the mother of his children. All that was included in the sense and ideal of home, she meant to him. But that aspiration of the spirit that can inform love with selflessness, raise it to moments of godhood . . . could Mario know or even understand this thing. . . .

She drew back suddenly as from some precipice apprehended with the instinct rather than seen. The current of her thought rushed back and seized upon the special instance as a sort of refuge, only to decide that in the present emergency she was, after all, helpless. The attraction, such as it was, would hold Mario until its mystery was dispelled or some stronger feeling took its place. This young girl whom he almost despised he would not give up while the spell, such as it was, bound him, while the chord was unresolved. He would promise and conceal it if she pressed him, as he had in those first days when she questioned. Infidelity in general Mario never attempted to deny; infidelity in special he never admitted. Out of the chivalrous code that protects the wife — in part, perhaps, yes. There was no use in going all over that again. She did not care. She was singularly free from even that sense of possession usually the last thing to disappear in a union. She was fond of him, of course — the lovable, attractive, troublesome child — how could one help it! And perhaps after all she might trust to his traditional sense of respect for the *signorina*. And the girl *did* look as if she were able to take care of herself as Mario had said . . . an unpleasant little person, Mrs.

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Montague Smith was right. Compared with her Luisa Castiglione was a madonna.

She roused herself with a sigh of distaste. Why must one be compelled to consider the psychology of this subject? Why must it constitute so large a part of life's problem? Then again she sensed the precipice, and turned to her husband just as he in his turn started to address her.

"Your friend Mr. Griscom, who I believe would not care if there were not a woman in the world, surely deserves some courtesy at our hands. We must not forget that it was he who saved the life of our child."

Nina Varesca turned away her head. "I do not forget," she said.

"We should ask him to dinner," Mario persisted.

"He is a very busy person just now — but in any case we will ask him — next week," his wife answered.

The next morning the telephone rang a few moments after Mario had gone out, and Nina answered the call. She recognized Lois' voice at once, the toneless boy voice that had grown familiar over Sunday. As the girl did not inquire who was answering the telephone, Nina did not disclose her identity in telling her that the count was not at home, but only inquired if there was "any message." There was a brief pause, then in the baulked tone of unconcealed disappointment, the voice demanded bluntly when Count Varesca would be at home.

"I think not till the latter part of the afternoon," Nina

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informed her ungracious questioner, and discovered that Lois had "hung up" without further ceremony.

She left the telephone with a disturbed face. Evidently Lois did not intend to let Mario escape. What could she do? Seek out another and safer siren and invite her to dinner, and if that failed — "*Bisogna rassegnarsi*" — but no, there was one other expedient — to rouse his latent jealousy herself. An instant sharp dismissal of such means rose in her like an instinct. She would not play that game any longer — self-respect forbade.

Then catching sight of the clock she remembered that she had a lunch engagement with Jane Worthing who was making a sketch of Paolo and that she had promised during the forenoon to drop in on Mildred.

CHAPTER XII

Mildred received Nina in her boudoir, a rose-hued bower whose walls were covered with prints of madonnas and infant St. Johns, informing her with subdued excitement that Percy was being interviewed in the library; and in response to Nina's comment, "That is one of the great American institutions, is it not?" Mildred hastened to explain, "Percy almost never permits it. He detests anything like publicity. Only sometimes he says he cannot have the heart to refuse the poor things when he knows it means a cheque to them. Of course they are all eager to hear anything he will say." Then with the air of courteously turning from her own affairs to those of her guest, Mildred inquired:

"You are enjoying your stay in America, Nina?"

Why was it, Nina wondered, that Mildred's remarks seemed always to lead to the social *cul-de-sac*? "Very much, dear. Your friends have been so kind to me."

They had been Nina's friends as well, although the connecting chord had been necessarily partially severed in her long absence, but Mildred's characteristic reply was, "Of course they would be nice to you on Percy's account. I'm sorry so many of our friends are away.

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People don't stay in town much in March and April. Percy says he doesn't see how anyone with a soul can prefer Bermuda or Florida to our Northern Spring."

"I am afraid I am one of the soulless ones," Nina confessed with her disarming smile. "A New York spring seems to me to consist of wind, dust and loose papers principally. But perhaps I have acquired debilitating tropical tastes."

"You spent Sunday at Mrs. Montague Smith's, did you not? Isn't her place lovely!" Mildred had Percy's air of purposely changing from a disagreeable to a pleasant subject.

"It is indeed. She has been especially nice to us. I think it is most charming of her," said Nina.

"Yes, she is very hospitable," was Mildred's answer to that. "She always entertains all the new arrivals, And she has that pretty cordial manner for everyone alike. I think everybody likes Mrs. Monty Smith." Having thus removed all possible element of flattery to her cousin in the situation, Mildred, who with complete unawareness of the effect she produced, always turned tribute from the present to the absent friend, spoke of a matter that had been very much in her mind the last few days.

Percy had quoted some opinion of Nina's, and Mildred hotly loyal in defense of the implications her husband had found in her cousin's words had startled him by stating that she would ask Nina "exactly" what her beliefs and theories were in that respect. She asked now and when

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Nina had answered, Mildred's face was very grave. Percy had not misunderstood. As always he was right. For Nina had expressed herself with all honesty and frankness, too unaccustomed to Mildred's viewpoint to understand the shock she was giving until she had committed herself.

"Do you mean to say," Mildred grasped it slowly with a flushing cheek, "that you don't *mind* having Mario flirt with other women?"

"If I did I should be a very unhappy woman."

Mildred's immobile brows contracted. "And are all Italian husbands like that?"

"I think all Italians, and perhaps all Latins, are alike in their attitude toward women. I suppose Italians are not any more all alike than we are except that there is more sameness in their lives and that therefore their minds run more in accepted grooves of thought than ours do. But of course the difference in type is very marked, not only between the north and the south, but each province differs from the other. The Toscáno is not like the Románo nor the Genovése like the Torinése. But I doubt if any of them regard marital infidelity as a serious matter."

Nina's characterizations meant little to Mildred whose mind was not analytical. She could only dwell painfully upon the one disturbing fact. She dropped her work in her lap — it was a blouse she was elaborately embroidering. "It would *kill* me if my husband were like that! Of course I couldn't imagine such a thing in connection

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with Percy. He is too high minded — but why — I simply could not *live* if such a thing came to me.”

“Oh, yes, you could. It is surprising how much one can live through, and how pale and mild past tragedies seem when you look back on them.”

Mildred gave her an unsmiling look. “I shouldn’t like them to seem like that.” She resumed her sewing.

Nina smiled. “That shows how young you are, Milly dear. It is only in youth that our tragedies are precious.”

Mildred did not answer. Her manner of sewing seemed almost disciplinary.

“Dear child, why do you put your eyes out with that fine embroidery? You can afford to buy all the pretty blouses you want.”

“Percy likes to see me sewing,” Mildred’s reply had an austere note. “He says he would love to think that I made all my own things. You have no idea what intimate sacred sort of ideas he has about women.”

Nina murmured some vague reply and rose. “I must go. It is lunch time now.”

Mildred folded her work neatly and rose also. “Won’t you stay to lunch, Nina?” The invitation had a perfunctory sound. Certainly, Nina reflected, Mildred’s manner toward her had changed since their last meeting.

“Thanks, no. Jane is to lunch with me. After that we go to her studio. She is making the most adorable sketch of Paolo in charcoal.”

“It is your affair, Nina, but don’t you think a woman

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in your position makes a mistake to dine publicly with a woman who has made herself conspicuous as Jane has done?"

"We shall not lunch publicly because I loathe the vulgarity and restlessness of the New York restaurants. But as to being seen with Jane — surely, Mildred, you cannot think that I would hesitate on my own account."

Mildred's color rose. "Possibly with your Continental theories upon such subjects you do not consider what Jane has done — anything to object to."

Nina did not answer at once. Her eyes seemed to look upon something in a region unconfined by time and space. Glancing at her a sudden formless compunction smote Mildred. There was surely something noble about Nina . . . despite Percy's opinions and the endorsement that Nina's own words seemed to have given them. But when her cousin spoke the sense of doubt and distrust returned to her.

"I think, Milly dear, that those questions are not always as simple as Nineteenth Century moralists would have had us believe. As for poor Janie, I see her entirely — almost symbolically — as the woman who is sacrificed. She had the right to love just as you and I have it, yet she has had to pay a terrible price that life has not demanded of you and me. We see footlight celebrities who live their lives as men do, going scot-free, courted and entertained. We ignore secret affairs safeguarded by loyal families, and no one cares so long as it isn't publicly proclaimed. The intriguante is not dis-

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graced. We meet her in society. But Jane has not had these protections. You know what sort of a woman she is. Jane is a lady, sensitive, fastidious, not some little Bohemian person without background or traditions, unaware of the conventions she is breaking. There are plenty of girls like that among the art students in Paris. I suppose there are here too. But Jane is a very different sort and she has sacrificed everything a woman of her sort values—with her eyes open—for the man she loved; when he was gone she had nothing left. No, dear, I don't think association with poor tragic little Jane is going to misrepresent any woman. And if it were, it ought not to make any difference to her."

"As you choose. Your life is your own affair, Nina, and your ways are different from mine." Mildred's voice had a smothered sound. Perhaps in spite of the inculcations of Percy she was touched.

Nina laid a caressing hand upon her cousin's shoulder. "Down underneath I don't believe we are so very different in our feeling about the essentials."

But Mildred definitely turned aside. "I think we are," she said.

Nina thought about it again as she walked down Fifth Avenue. It was curious how very little Mildred had grown up. The quality of her youth had hardened, crystallized, that was all.

CHAPTER XIII

After a quiet lunch with Jane Worthing, served in Nina's apartment, the two women accompanied by Paolo walked to Jane's studio which was on a cross street a few blocks east of Nina's hotel, but compassing all that difference of caste possible within the radius of a few blocks in heterogeneous New York. It was a business street, dingy with all the dinginess of an old street in "The Quarter," but lacking any faintest suggestion of Parisian picturesqueness. But after they had taken a somewhat contracted elevator — which served at least to save the long climb to the French attic — Nina found herself in a good-sized room full of sunshine, rich in those touches of beauty, achievable by the poorest artist.

It was Nina's first visit to the studio. In the beginning she had found Jane's reserve hard to overcome. And at the first sitting tactfulness had prompted her to send the child with his nurse. But in a frank talk she had broken down her friend's pathetic defenses, and now something like the old comradeship had been established between them.

Jane's studio had none of the dusty disorder found in some artists' quarters, and the small bedroom opening out of it was nun-like. It contained in addition, a bath, a

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kitchenette and a large closet. The kitchenette, Jane explained, she seldom used. "I am afraid I don't care for intensive domesticity, especially when it is solitary. It seems to me only a grade above the student's light house-keeping that one of my friends calls 'pig housekeeping.' The janitor's wife sends up my meals, such as they are."

Nina looked troubled. "Janie dear, you ought to have the right kind of food."

"Oh, it's well enough." Jane lightly dismissed it. "Its chief defect is lack of imagination. And Irish stews seem to exist to an extent that seems scarcely reasonable from a Swedish kitchen, but it's eatable."

Nina, wandering about, came upon a sketch for a magazine cover, the windblown figure of a young girl in white against a blue summer sea. "How adorable! Is that yours, Janie?"

Jane nodded. "Rejected by the magazine that ordered it. I am going to try it somewhere else when I get time."

"Fancy their rejecting it!"

"It wasn't what they wanted. I was asked to paint an innocent young girl, but when I brought it in the art man — who was unusually articulate — said the objection was, that she looked really innocent. 'She must look innocent like a stage ingenue,' he said. 'You know — not really innocent, just an innocent expression put on, with a knowing look about the eyes, and mouth.'"

"Oh, Janie, how horrid. Are things here really like that!"

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"The most popular cover," Jane went on with a pencil between her teeth, "is what I call the Incipient Kiss, in which a young man of the Willard Wright type, only with a bull neck and a passionate expression, is bent down very closely over a young woman of the kind I was requested to paint — a particularly sophisticated chorus girl type impersonating a débutante. That is a stock design. Another is the toothless, smiling baby. Those are covers the popular woman's magazines use when they want what they call a 'sure thing.'"

Nina picked up a fantastic design in guache lying carelessly among a litter of papers on her table.

"That," Jane explained, "is a design — rejected by the way — for the cover of a book I am illustrating. None other in fact than the latest outpouring of the genius of Percy Loring."

"It was Percy I am sure who rejected it! Such subtleties are not for his understanding. But surely Mr. Creston must have liked it."

"Yes." Her preparations for work concluded, Jane seated herself at her easel. "He said he did. But Mr. Creston always refuses you so beautifully that you feel as if it were somehow a greater compliment than an acceptance. But he has to regard Percy's tastes and prejudices. Percy is a best seller. Now then, Paolo, are we ready?"

The child with his sensitive alacrity ran up and took his pose as precisely as a professional model. "Like this?" He referred it to the artist.

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Jane nodded. "Exactly like that, Paolo! What a splendid memory you have."

"I remember," Paolo recorded with kindling eyes, "*everything*."

"He does too," remarked his mother. "It is really alarming." Then she returned to their former topic.

"I find Mr. Creston a person of great discrimination. Why does he publish Cousin Percy Loring?"

Jane cast an amused glance at her friend. "They sell, oh, lady of leisure, blissfully unaware of sordid commercialism! They sell prodigiously. That's what it means to be a best seller."

"But why!" exclaimed Nina Varesca. "Why? They are sweetened sawdust, sawdust sweetened with adulterated sugar. Not even honest breakfast food. Does the present day public in America prefer sweetened sawdust?"

Jane put a touch upon her sketch and leaned back to regard it. "I am afraid many of them do. Most people are sentimental and unthinking. Percy Loring's novels are popular because they formulate for the banal mind all the things that it has accepted as maxims and is able to understand, a little more coherently than it can express them itself. They have the morality of melodrama and positively welter with sentimentality."

Paolo interposed — his quick ear had caught the name — "Mother, dear, why does Cousin Percy stand so straight? Isn't he made so he can bend? He looks always like this," the small Latin hand indicated subtly.

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"Yes, dear, I think he can close up." Nina laughed but Paolo was reflective. He shook his head.

"He doesn't look as if he could." There was a silence in which Jane worked, a long consideration, Nina noted, — remote, yet concentrated, then a few mysteriously telling touches.

At the end of twenty minutes during which Nina read, Jane leaned back. "You can rest now, Paolo."

"Dearest mother, may I go to see the parrot of Señor Mendez?" pled Paolo. "He invited me last week."

"A very dear old Spanish painter, with exquisite manners," Jane explained. "He does pathetic out-of-date pictures and lives on an infinitesimal income. He has the studio next to mine and I ask him in because his little room is so cold. He came in while Paolo was here last time and they became great friends in French."

"Put on your jacket, *carissimo*," Nina responded at once to this description, "but don't stay too long."

Paolo flew off on what Jane called his little winged-Mercury feet, and Nina said, "Perhaps I might buy one of his little out-of-date pictures."

"Dear Nina," Jane smiled sadly, "if you begin that there would be no end. New York is full of pathetic derelicts and failures."

"We haven't much money by the American standard," Nina answered, "but if you know of anyone who really needs a little lift you must let me know. It is no reason for not helping one that one can't help all."

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"I will, *contessa beata*."

"My brain is all seething with new sensations, new adjustments," Nina said after a short silence. "I want to talk about things to you. To begin with dear, good little Mildred,—I seem to have quite grown away from her. It makes me feel very badly. It seems as if it must be my fault, she is so sweet and affectionate, and yet somehow it is an effort to talk to her. She seems very unsophisticated about life. Are many American women like that?"

Jane considered. "I think there is still that type in our generation as there was in our mothers'. But the very young girls brought up on the literature and plays and thought of the day — there seems to be little *they* don't know about life! Although I suppose really they don't understand the meaning of half of the things they say."

"Like funny Peggy Long," Nina recollected. "But Mildred is a married woman, twenty-nine years old."

"Yes, but you see her husband's influence has only increased her sentimental idealism," Jane remarked.

"Is any of it real? Does he ever abandon those distressing stilts?"

Jane shook her head. "Not with Mildred, I fancy. In wrath I suppose he might."

"I simply cannot understand that marriage!" Nina exclaimed.

Jane smiled. "Dear Mildred has no sense of humor."

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"That explains how it was possible in the beginning," Nina agreed, "but it is not entirely clear to me why Percy wanted to marry Mildred? What did she have to offer his ambitions — if, as I am told, the matter of birth and traditions does not count for anything here any more?"

"They don't seem to count much except with the people that have them," Jane laughed. "Still as Percy's antecedents were exceedingly homespun, I can imagine that in his youth he felt that intense sense of class bitterness that you can find in America — the kind of person that is sure he is 'just as good as' the other fellow, but isn't sure the other fellow knows it. Therefore I've no doubt it gratified him to have a wife like Mildred, finer than the things he had grown up with yet uncritical and adoring."

"Poor little Mildred, I felt that she was somehow a calculated part of his scheme of life."

Jane looked off reflectively. "I suppose his people starved and saved in the pathetic New England way to give him the advantages they had not had themselves, and — I may be unjust — but I seem to see him afterwards, turning his back on them."

"Is he a usual type? Are there many Percy Loring in America?" the countess asked, distaste and amusement mingled in her tone:

"No, I don't think so. Dear me, I hope not!" Jane squinted at the sketch from a distance, then came to sit on the divan beside her friend.

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"I should say that he is an illustration of the vices of our virtues. I suppose he would not pose as a literary *matinée* idol if he were a Continental writer, would he? He would not have the same standard to wish to simulate."

"Certainly not if he were an Italian," Nina agreed. "I think it is safe to say that you could not find a Latin Percy Loring."

"Due to the difference in standards, I suppose," Jane analyzed. "Percy Loring's 'ideals' represent a sort of caricature of Anglo-Saxon morality."

"I suppose it takes a long acquaintance to be sure that one is just to the individual or race of a dissimilar type," Nina reflected. "But there is unquestionably a marked difference between the Anglo-Saxon and the Continental — broadly speaking — in the attitude toward sex relationships and in the attitude toward truth. I should say that the Latin man's philosophy practically denies the virtue of woman, that the German never ceases suspecting it, while the Englishman and the American seldom doubt it without proof. And I don't think you could make any Continental even understand the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward untruth. Loyalty, the human phase of the principle involved in truth, they perhaps adhere to as closely as we do. But that they attach any real significance to the literal truth of an answer or a statement, I very much doubt. Whereas distrust and untruth in American and English people seem to be individual weaknesses, rather than racial ones."

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"Percy Loring," Jane defined, "represents the effect of our standards upon the weak man desirous of approval. It may even indicate his aspiration toward the better thing. Hence the effect of stilts."

"The resulting type is certainly less attractive than that of the frank young materialist who does not commit himself to an unpractical standard," Nina reflected.

"How about the Italian women?" Jane asked. "How do they feel about the philandering of their husbands?"

Nina smiled. "I think the good wife expects little and suspects always. The woman who goes in for the joy of living intrigues with the constant fear of discovery, which, perhaps, on the whole, rather adds zest to the game." She was silent a moment, her eyes on the ugly pile of the roof tops. She raised her arms with a little restrained gesture and clasped them behind her head. "Oh, it is a lotus-eating life that we lead, Mario and I — part of the winter in Rome, a trip to Milano for the opera, Paris in the spring, sometimes Vienna,—but Mario, of course, being an Italian, feels it a patriotic duty to hate the Viennese so we don't go there often."

"As a setting Europe is infinitely more interesting than America, there is no denying that." Jane's eyes seemed to look on the vision of remembered beauty. "But you have got to *belong*. You can't separate any element of the picture from the background. After all when you come to philosophizing, life and art have the same maxims."

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"That is just it. I feel as if I didn't belong either side of the water," Jane felt an undercurrent of seriousness in her friend's impersonal tone of analysis.

"I should say rather that you belong to both and are the richer thereby."

"Consoling Janie! Nevertheless I am beginning to have an uncomfortable sense of being a hybrid. I find myself just a little different from all of you on both sides of the Atlantic in my derivations. Yet on the whole New York seems more alien to me now than Rome. Several times lately I have caught myself wondering," as she spoke Nina Varesca's eye went to the spirited little sketch of her child and rested there, "what I would have been like if mother hadn't made that request to have me sent to a French school."

Jane's mouth had a whimsical twist. "You wouldn't have been like Mildred!"

"Mother loved France so," Nina reflected. "I remember her talking about it to me when I was a little thing. Yet I realize now when I re-read her letters that her France wasn't France at all."

"I suppose her France was a fascinating, picturesque foreign land, fitted out with all the sentiments and psychology of the Victorian age," Jane suggested.

"Just that." Nina smiled.

"You know, I think that ancient banality about human nature being the same in all countries and ages is of all such statements the most idiotic," Jane remarked.

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"I suppose when you get down to primitive fundamentals it is the same."

"Human nature may remain the same, but psychology certainly differs. Men may be all alike when they are starving to death, but in civilized life the primitive forces are overlaid by all sorts of inhibitions and reactions.

"Some people are not sensible to the differences — at least not until some particular one touches them in a sensitive place. You notice that in the Americans abroad," said Nina. "I remember when I first went to Europe to live I noticed the differences — the superficial differences and I thought how unlike America it all was. Then I began to see the similarities and to think how alike we all were. Later still, after my marriage, I began to realize the differences again, the big fundamental psychologic differences,— the barriers —"

She broke off at that point, Jane noted. "But now since I have come back here among my own people again, the contrast seems to strike me more vividly than it did in Italy. In spite of the changed conditions, the un-Americanism of New York, the ugly new money standard and all the discords and social maladjustments there is something in America — even in New York — something about it all that inspires one, that makes our old world life seem futile, selfish, drifting. Sometimes since I have come back here, it has almost made me wish that my boys might be brought up Americans." Nina's hands dropped. She sat silent a moment and Jane Worthing watching her

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wondered as she had many times before if Nina Varesca was happy in her marriage.

"A funny thing, life — our lives," Nina said at last; "the way things have gone with us,— you and Milly and Fair and me."

"Fair at least, is not made for introspections or tragedy," Jane remarked. "Beauty will marry the beast and, no doubt, live happily ever after."

"How can you prophesy so confidently!"

"Southern girls seem often to make those mercenary marriages," Jane explained, "and in some way instead of being unhappy or ending in a divorce they *do* 'live happily ever after.'"

"How do you account for it?" Nina asked her.

"Their love of the gaieties and luxuries, their capacity for sentimentalizing their lives and a strong tendency to travel along the line of least resistance when they are comfortable. They have the gift for living on the surface of life. And they understand how to manage men."

"Like the Italians," Nina commented. "But what a contrast Fair's life, mine and Mildred's to yours and Bertha Rennels'! You two have really done something. It must be a wonderful thing, that consciousness of the ability to do! Whatever has happened or can happen, Janie, you always have your work."

"Yes, I have my work," Jane repeated quietly. "But I don't care anything about it." For a moment a hidden fire flamed into life in her quiet eyes.

"Don't say that."

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"But it is true. There is, you see, nothing ahead of me."

"One must never say that, one must never admit it." She looked up to meet Jane's smile. "You have never been brought face to face with a stone wall, Nina. I hope with all my heart you will never come to that last room in the house of life—for there is no window there."

From the look in her friend's face Nina Varesca turned away as though to read the sad meanings it laid bare were a violation; but when she spoke she touched directly upon the very source of the wound. "Which means that to you love is practically all. I had not thought it was like that with women in America, women whose lives are full of wide interests and often an absorbing work or art. I had thought that to women like you and Bertha love might be an episode as it is with men."

"Such love as I mean is not likely to be an episode with our men any more than it is with women," Jane replied, "and as to the women whose art or work takes them into the world I think the world's rough treatment, even if they have only suffered from the smaller knocks, makes a man's love and protection mean perhaps more to them than it can to the protected woman."

"Yet love—the thing that we usually mean by love—is, *must* be an ephemeral experience; a splendid wild thrilling episode, a thing of dreams and flame. It *can't* last, any more than we can hold back the passing of Spring. At best, friendship and affection remain."

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"Companionship lasts." Jane Worthing looked up, and for an instant Nina Varesca, civilized, disciplined, long since emancipated from all the emotional crudities, had an odd sense of being a child in life's wisdom beside her. "Close understanding, intimate companionship last; lives interwoven. *That* is the loss that you can never get over." Something indecipherable in her friend's eyes, the merest flicker in passing, caused Jane to wonder again.

"Janie, dear," when Nina Varesca spoke after a silence, some tinge of that expression seemed to linger in her voice. "If you have had that — however briefly, at whatever cost — you have had much."

"I know," Jane answered. "And what you have had you always have, — I have come to know that too. But don't ever believe that work can entirely take the place of the human thing with any human woman. The genius may be different. I suppose geniuses if not inhuman are at least unhuman."

"Ah, well, you see I spoke with the unromantic voice of the seasoned matron."

Jane rose from her seat to give a touch to the charcoal sketch, then looked from the sketch to the mother's face. "His resemblance to you is so elusive. He is all Italian, yet he is all yours too."

"Oh, yes, he is all mine." The simple mother-look rose in Nina Varesca's eyes, banishing as it did their subtleties and inscrutabilities. The artist's glance remained upon her face with a scrutiny half technical, half

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personal. It was difficult for her to believe that a man like Mario Varesca could satisfy this woman.

The door opened and Paolo flew in tumultuously but lightly, his exquisite little face alight, in his hand a slender green feather. "See, mother, what the Señor Mendez has given me."

Nina examined it with sympathetic rapture. It was one of the parouquet's feathers. She put it through the fold of ribbon on the child's white hat. "*Ecco, non è bello?*" she exclaimed and again he impelled himself into her arms. All joy to him was part of his love for his mother. She was his universe.

Nina gathered her child into a close embrace, her face transformed into a radiant passion of motherhood. "Oh, if I could get that, you modern madonna," cried Jane, in professional rapture.

Nina looked up. "What more could I ask of any man in this world than to have given me this," she said.

"For some women certainly it is enough," Jane reflected.

"I am that kind." Nina released her child with a kiss.

"I wonder," thought Jane Worthing. "We will put it in the picture, Paolo," she said aloud. "That little touch of green will be just the thing."

"Do you remember, mamma mia, the blue bird's feather that Mr. Griscom found on the mountain? I wore it in my little white hat."

"Another sample of the Paolo memory." His mother put him down. "You must pose now, dear."

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"Does Paolo know my Mr. Griscom?" Jane looked into the glowing little face, with a smile she seldom wore.

"He is *my* Mr. Griscom," Paolo challenged her with laughing contradiction, and as Jane's glance passed from the child's to the mother's face she caught there an escaping expression that caused her to wonder. Then a memory of the story of Paolo's rescue came back to her. That, of course, was the explanation.

"I had forgotten. Paolo is the one Dan Griscom saved from drowning, is he not?" she asked in a lower voice.

Nina nodded. "I think I never realized the full sense of motherhood until that terrible second when I thought I had lost him." Her face changed at the recollection. "I believe I had been rather a primitive selfish young mother before that day."

She changed the subject a little suddenly. "You know him rather well, then, Dan Griscom? Don't you like him?"

"*Like* him!" Jane smiled significantly. "That doesn't at all describe the feeling I have for Dan Griscom. I *love* him — really. He has the sensitive kindness of a woman with the strength of a man and the most exquisite practical chivalry — not the Percy Loring kind — toward all women, any woman. Let me tell you what he did for me once. It was not long after Jack died and things were not any too easy for me about my work in any way — quite aside from the personal side, I mean. I remember I used to pass a sign when I went

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down town that read, 'Complete funeral. Seventy-five dollars', and I used to think, 'Why I couldn't even afford to die!'"

"Jane, dear!" the rare tears came to Nina Varesca's eyes. "I can't bear to think about it."

"You blessed Nina! I didn't mean to be pathetic. It's all over now. Well — things were like that when I got a chance to do some fashion drawings for a Sunday paper. It was the time that Dan Griscom was doing some editorial writing for the paper — it was the one his father used to own, and I am practically sure that he got the work for me although he always denied it. And they always sent a boy up for my drawings so that I never had to go down to the office. One day I gave the boy something and he wouldn't take it. 'That's all right,' he said, 'Mr. Griscom squared it with me. He said I was never to take anything from you' — he said 'off you' to be exact — 'and that I was always to come for your stuff.' I asked him if it wasn't usual to send for material from contributors. I had not done periodical illustrating before that — and he said, 'Not on your life, they send me special to you. Only maybe he wouldn't want me to tell.' That to me," Jane concluded, "at a time when I was — well not in the way of receiving any too much respect from people. That is the kind of man Dan Griscom is."

Nina was silent for some moments then she leaned over and took her friend's hand. "Poor little Janie," she said. "How brave you have been."

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"But wasn't it wonderful of him?" Jane insisted.

"Yes, but it is what I would have expected." Nina spoke with her eyes on the ugly roof tops but she saw snow mountains. "I remember so well my first impression of him,—of a sort of ice bound strength all played over by warm kind sunlight. Switzerland may have suggested the simile," she added in a lighter tone.

"There will be a hot noon day sun on that mountain top when Dan falls in love if I am not mistaken," remarked Jane Worthing. "It will be a question then whether fire or ice will triumph."

Paolo, playing by himself in the corner with a lay figure, caught Griscom's name.

"I wish Mr. Griscom would come and see me," he said plaintively.

"He will, dear, some day. He said he would."

"You said he would come right away," Paolo protested, unconvinced.

"Mr. Griscom is very busy, dear. But I'll tell you what we'll do,—you shall write a letter inviting him to tea some afternoon, all in English. That will surely bring him."

Then Paolo was radiant. She watched him with a tender foreboding. "Paolo will always expect so much more of life than it can give," she said.

"But he will have the joy of his vision," said Jane Worthing, "the joy that no man taketh from you."

When Nina Varesca reached home she found Griscom's cards. He had left a small metal sword of

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mythological cut for Paolo. "To slay the dragon of the White mountain," he had written on the card.

"The dragon in the story Mr. Griscom told me, don't you remember, mother dear?" Paolo with a radiant face was making passes with his sword. "One morning there were great round clouds and one of them got caught on the top of the mountain, don't you remember, *Mamina mia?*"

She put her hand out to caress the small glowing face. "Yes, dear. Of course I remember."

CHAPTER XIV

"Mrs. Wilmot is urging me to go with her to a reception at the house of some woman of the artistic set," the countess informed Bertha Rennels over a cup of tea the next afternoon, "a Miss Wells — do you know of her?"

"Evangeline Wells?" Bertha's inflection was peculiar. "Oh, yes, I *know* her! It would never have occurred to me to call her circle the artistic set! She is a person who has graduated from yellow journalism to editorship of a magazine known as *The Three Arts* of which a witty contributor has said that she knows a little less of each one than she does of the others."

"I like your marginal notes, Bertha Rennels. Tell me more about Evangeline." Nina Varesca leaned back among her cushions in a way, Bertha reflected, that she could hardly have done had she remained in her native land.

"When I first knew Evangeline —" Bertha thus encouraged embarked upon reminiscences, "she thought that Titian was the name of a hairdye. Somehow she had escaped even learning the names of the old masters, but she knew a few modern ones that she had interviewed for the newspapers. She thought opera was a form of musical entertainment in which Nordica sang. Even

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the elementary German and Italian distinction was unknown to her in her beginnings. Now she is the playmate of all the painters who need advertisement — not to speak of musicians, actors and writers. She gets some poor devil who is in the know to teach her the labels and correct her ignorant use of technical terms. Then, with excellent economy she saves her mistakes to write into the signed articles of others. If the victim objects she tells everyone that it is *just* as the author wrote it. But perhaps my grievances are a little too technical to be interesting."

"You are always interesting," the countess declared, "Shall you be there?"

Bertha shook her head. "Never more. I got in for a few of them the first winter I began to write."

"Had I better decline then?"

"Not necessarily. If you are studying the sociology of New York, it might amuse you — you don't *live* here," Bertha laughed. "Only don't let them invade you afterwards. You will not find many sensitive plants among them. You will probably see a typically Bohemian gathering — some talented men, some highly seasoned professional ladies, and a number of unsophisticated girls from small towns and the West who have all the sensations of being admitted to a salon. It is sufficiently typical to be worth including in a Seeing New York excursion," Bertha concluded as she rose to leave.

"Then I may lunch with you, Friday?" The countess seemed to remind her guest of a great favor granted.

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"You know you promised to ask me and I refuse to be put off."

Bertha laughed. "Oh, arch flatterer — if you are brave enough to face the lunch!"

"I can if you can," Nina answered.

"Ah, but I *have* to," Bertha reminded her.

"Will it be hash and prunes? That is what it always is in stories."

"No. It will be a smell of turnips at the front door and a choice of stew and veal cutlet probably. The desert will be apple sauce or sliced bananas and oranges. Everything will taste alike except the turnips and bananas. They alone are strong enough to triumph individually."

Nina laughed. "You can't frighten me off with turnips and bananas. I am coming Friday."

A few moments after Bertha's departure Maud Wilmot telephoned again, urging, almost beseeching, the favor of the countess' company that evening, so in the end Nina accepted. Mario consented to accompany her and the evening found them threading the rather dark and anomalous street, where the motor seemed to encounter unforeseeable pitfalls, which led to Evangeline's door.

Their editorial hostess noted her three distinguished guests the moment they appeared upon the threshold, and without waiting their approach hastened with almost tearful appreciation to greet them.

Nina noted the woman's experienced eyes. Evan-

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geline with a quick glance took in her titled guest's subtle costume and found it lacking. Evangeline herself was romantically gowned in flowing draperies of black with an orange flower in her banded Titian hair. She glanced about her crowded room with the quick, hard concentration of a floor-walker seeking an efficient clerk for an important customer. She must choose companions for these titled guests who could be trusted to hold them. She selected Mme. La Vallière who crossed her line of vision at the moment. Madame, however with a mechanically radiant recognition of the contessa, retreated with a hasty coquettish excuse. Evangeline then decided upon an Australian writer, a short narrow-shouldered young man whose olive skin and small congested features scarcely seemed suggestive of an Anglo-Saxon origin.

The Australian, who had a habit of fixing his small, bright eyes upon the person he addressed, was embarked upon a slow critical arraignment of America, its people and customs when Miss Wells presented him to the countess. His listener was a young woman of robust appearance, who frankly stated that she had just come to New York from the West to do newspaper work. The Australian, without ceasing the steady, if somewhat halting flow of his humorous accusation, bowed low to the countess, reiterating his last remark for her benefit,—“I say that America has all the defects of the young country —”

The young newspaper woman poured out in answer, a passionate flood of long accepted opinions with a vigor

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that almost endowed them with the vitality and novelty they had for their speaker. Then, as she became fully aware of the unflattering drift of the Australian's comments, she turned the broadside of her patriotic vehemence upon him, denying his statements loudly, albeit with more emotion than argument. Nina, contriving escape under cover of their heated dialogue as she moved away, heard the girl declaring, in a shaking voice, that she thought "American women were just the most *wonderful* women in the world."

"Without doubt," her companion agreed with his smile of doubtful sincerity, "I only say that they are a bit aggressive, you know."

Meantime, Mrs. Wilmot had refused, for the moment, other introductions, having discovered with sympathetic dismay, a young genius she had met before at Miss Wells' receptions, evidently suffering from some sudden indisposition; for she lay in a pose, classic and beautiful — yet nevertheless a frankly reclining pose — upon a couch in a corner. The young genius was a poetess, who recited her own lines and those of the Greek dramatists with alternate impartiality against a background of harp music played by a sister, also spiritually Greek.

Mrs. Wilmot, distressed at the thought that this lovely and gifted being should be so frail, approached her couch almost reverently. As she arrived, the poetess superbly turned her head and made some motion that Mrs. Wilmot assumed to be a movement to rise. She protested quickly,

"Oh, don't rise, I beg of you, I am *so* distressed that

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contessa approached their group. In order to make sure that the contessa was well entertained, Evangeline added to this group a young Hebrew with a shock of dark hair, wearing shell-rimmed glasses suspended from a wide black ribbon, who had two plays running on Broadway. This fact, Evangeline elaborated in introducing the young playwright. The young man, whose ear lobes touched his collar, but whose length of head, augmented to an exaggerated height by a virile pompadour, suggested the effects of the Phoenician bas reliefs, was thoroughly at ease with the contessa. It was a vital, alive personality at least, the contessa realized. The young playwright began to expound the drama from the typical standpoint of Broadway. The contessa, unfamiliar with the standpoint, with which in any case her own could not have coincided, nevertheless found the young man possessed of more mental soundness than Evangeline's other guests. But the count, who had been deposited by his hostess beside that intense being too sensitive for the world's contacts, had contrived escape and, interrupting his wife's conversation, bore her away on the excuse of examining a mediocre pen and ink sketch on the opposite wall.

There Evangeline again ran them to cover. Upon this difficult social problem of the elusive count and countess she brought to bear all her managerial capacity. Her lips thinned and her eyes narrowed. Her keen eye detected in these desirable guests, the signs of incipient farewell. She could not let her first real count and countess escape like this. In a corner, talking, to a young

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Swedish actress with sophisticated eyes, was an Austrian baron whose sophistication was more than a match for his companion's. Evangeline had satisfied herself that the baron's modest title was authentic, without enquiring too closely into the reasons why he chose America the crude, as a resting place. These guests must change partners, Evangeline decided, the baron with the countess, who was perhaps a little inconspicuous for his taste — still he could not fail to appreciate the importance of her title — and the actress, whose conversation was very highly spiced, would surely please the count, for of course, all Italian counts were dissipated.

Wreathed in conciliatory smiles, Evangeline approached her difficult guests. "Countess Varesca, I simply cannot allow this monopoly any longer. I shall suppress this devoted husband if he continues to hover about you in this persistent and adoring fashion." Evangeline's rather distressingly mobile mouth twisted gymnastically about the elaborate phraseology that she believed to be a model of irreproachable elegance. "With the men simply *pinning* away for a glimpse of the beautiful lady, and the women all *begging* me to present them to the count —" With an imperfect understanding of form, but entire competence in the manipulation of her plans Evangeline drew the count and countess toward the couple in the corner.

"Here is Baron von Eberding, who has been staring the countess out of countenance ever since she entered.

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And Count Varesca, I know you will enjoy talking with Mme. Hilda Petersen."

The transfer was effected. The baron's lecherous eyes remained fixed with some curiosity upon Nina. Familiar with the count's title he speculated profoundly as to their presence in this gathering. The actress mechanically transferred her ocular attentions to the count, who, by no means catholic in his susceptibilities, found her innuendoes and allusions odious, and her red-lipped bloneness unwholesome. He turned to his wife and found von Eberding's profaning eyes traveling over her. "And are you a friend of this Miss Evangeline — what is her name — Wells, isn't it?" the baron enquired.

Mario heard his wife's answer, "No, I have never met her before to-night. We came with an acquaintance who thought we might be interested in seeing the different artistic circles in New York."

The conversation was harmless — so far. But Mario saw that the baron's red-rimmed eyes again wandered with periodic resting places over his wife's face and form. "That explains your presence here," said the baron, with his Teutonic frankness. "I wondered, you know. Curious place New York." The baron's speech was almost without accent and suggested long residence in Great Britain.

"It seems to have become rather a curious place," said the countess. "I was born in New York. It used to be very different."

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Certainly the conversation was still harmless, but the countess heard her husband's voice at her shoulder, "Nina—" and turned to meet slumbering fires in his eyes although his tone was ice. "I must remind you that we go also to Mrs. Montague Smith's musicale this evening and that the hour is late."

"Is it really! Then we must make our adieus." She caught the baron's smile and the faint surprise in the pale heavy eyes of the actress.

"Take me to the aquarium or to the Zoo if you must, —but spare me, spare me, I beg of you, this human menagerie," raged Mario in his native tongue as they crossed the room to take leave of Mrs. Wilmot. They found her and left her rapturously listening to the pink-cheeked decadent poet and the vital successful young Phœnician dramatist.

In the narrow hall, squeezed by incoming and outgoing guests, they met Lloyd Creston alone. Each seemed surprised to meet the other. "We came with Mrs. Wilmot—" thus Nina explained their presence. "And is Mrs. Creston still away?"

The publisher's expression became faintly whimsical. "Mrs. Creston—why, no, she is back now—but she hasn't the pleasure of knowing Miss Wells, who invited me this morning when she came on a business errand to my office. Being interested as you are, in all the er—a—various phases, I—er—a—waived the formalities and accepted her very kind hospitality."

They met each other's eyes, smiled faintly, and nodded

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farewell. Lloyd Creston passed into the congested reception room as the count and countess, having tried in turn the doors of the kitchen and the bathroom, finally found the rightful means of exit, and eventually, their cab.

"How did you enjoy Maud Wilmot's personally conducted excursion to Bohemia," Mrs. Montague Smith enquired in an intermission between introductions and manipulations.

Nina smiled. "Not very much, I'm afraid. I think I am cured of the desire for alien social experiences."

Mrs. Montague Smith looked amused. "I thought so. After all, there *are* gifted people of one's own sort. And when one associates with people fundamentally different from one's self, however interesting they may be, the result in the end is never successful—as, I am afraid, our Peggy will discover. Maud Wilmot seems to have escaped so far, but she has a gift for what Monty calls 'slipping from under.' I am afraid too that dear Maud isn't always able to judge without labels. She is not after all one of us. Discrimination isn't one of the things one acquires by marriage, is it—"

A young violinist with an arranged disorder of what Bertha Rennels called "virtuoso locks" above a plain Kansas American face, began the opening bars of the Bruch concerto. He had played with the Philharmonic, Mrs. Montague Smith explained in a hasty whisper.

It was a creditable if not an enthralling performance. How much art of that kind young America was putting

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forth! And why should one do things like this for pleasure that one was not obliged to do. . . .

Nina Varesca glanced about the ample drawing room, filled but not crowded. At least Mrs. Montague Smith's guests presented an agreeable contrast to the salon of Miss Evangeline Wells.

CHAPTER XV

The next afternoon Nina stopped at a Fifth Avenue art gallery to take a look at a Futurist Exhibition on her way to Edith Wickham's.

At the gallery she dismissed her cab which was either imbued with that spirit of rebellion said to be latent in machinery or was imperfectly understood by the mild pink-cheeked Swede who was operating it, for after almost every halt at a street crossing it had become stalled.

She studied those singular products of hysteria and opportunism until that inevitable moment when chaotic prisms and intoxicated angles began to move before her eyes, and a sense of irritation to take the place of amusement. Remembering that there was an hotel cab stand at the next corner she started to walk there and make her own choice of vehicle and driver. But as she folded the little catalogue and put it in her purse for future reference, she made the unwelcome discovery that it contained exactly five cents. She paused in front of a shop window to think. A long weedy youth with a greenish yellow skin and a tall yellowish green hat grotesquely exaggerating his facial contour, knocked past her as he covered the street in a swaggering zig-zag. Two men pressed upon her from behind so that she moved to let them pass. Both were dark skinned and of a short

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stocky build. One had a cigar so securely planted between his teeth that it had the effect of having been forcibly nailed in; the other emitted a shrill piercing whistle of extraordinary volume. Both with the same wide swagger seemed to cover the entire area of the sidewalk. Clearly it was not going to be pleasant walking to Washington Square in the Saturday afternoon crowd. She might telephone to her hotel for a cab but that would involve a tiresome wait. A Fifth Avenue bus crashed past as she stood thinking about it. That would solve the problem. She walked to the corner and raised her hand to hail it, then recollected that she had not even money enough to take a bus. If she went home again she would be late. Why not as well take a Sixth Avenue car? She used to take street cars quite often when she was a school girl in New York.

Having made her decision she crossed over to Sixth Avenue and waited for a car. The street was very muddy and there was no car in sight. She stood at the crossing trying to hold her skirts away from the mire. Some men shouted at her from a passing truck which turned so close a corner that it would have gone over her feet if she had not moved back with extraordinary quickness. The men on the truck laughed to see her start, peering down into her face with the free insolent eyes of that class without a race, the hybrid hoodlum; and a debonair person leaning against a saloon on the corner sang an affectionate popular song at her. Far down the street a car was slowly approaching. When it came

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it proved to be crowded with people standing even on the platform. She took it as there was no other in sight. For the first time in her life she had to force a passage as the men, obviously all aliens from their appearance, stood clogging the entrance with unyielding bodies; motionless like waiting animals, they seemed not to have the slightest consciousness of the necessity to move that others might pass. The car was ill-smelling and all the ventilators were closed. Nina asked the conductor to open some, but he replied roughly, "Can't make all de odders cold 'cause you're hot," and passed on, helping himself along by handling her shoulders freely. In a few moments he forced his way back with hard bungling turns and pushes. She looked at his face, small, dark with unshaped features, the hoodlum face. He was not like the amiable Irish conductors she remembered. He also was alien. A red-faced woman in a shawl screamed at him shrilly because he had carried her past her corner. The conductor answered her with familiar pleasantry:

"Terrible sorry lady, wouldn't 'a done it fer de woild."

The woman hurrying toward the door with a characteristic lack of physical balance, like the conductor, assisted herself by handling the people in her path as if they were inanimate objects. As the car stopped she fell heavily against Nina and righted herself; she remained as unconscious of personal contact as if she had touched the door. For several blocks Nina had the new and far from pleasing experience of clinging to a dirty

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strap which left its dark impress upon her white gloves, while the motor-man, whether indifferently or temperamentally, jerked the car along in a way that made preservation of balance impossible. Presently a man rose and gave Nina his seat. Standing in front of her afterwards he concentrated a fixed stare upon her. Averting her face from this intimate inspection she glanced about the crowded car in which people herded together like cattle, fell over each other with unresisting bodies as the car stopped and started. Some of them laughed foolishly as if it were a joke, others seemed too impervious to be aware of discomfort.

On the opposite side of the car sat a young girl correctly and expensively dressed, finished to the last detail of patent leather boots and white gloves. Her furs were handsome, her hat of the latest fashion. There was nothing in her appearance — except that curious suggestion of a cast that is scarcely a cast about the eyes, and some peculiarity of modeling in her dark face — to indicate that she was not an American. She was talking in some foreign tongue that was neither Latin nor Teutonic with her companion, a slouching blonde young Slav with new clothes too large for him and the sheepish expression and carriage of the rustic emigrant. As swiftly as that the transition was made! Would it take him a year or only six months to reproduce the outward effect of his companion? The girl watched the countess furtively with a sullen antagonism of sex and class. The man stared openly like a peasant. Next to her sat an

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art student from the West, evidently of Teutonic or Scandinavian parentage. The vertical lines between her china blue eyes produced by the habit of passionate absorption deepened as she stared at the contessa's clothes with a view to imitation and wondered what there was about them anyway that made her want to copy them. The gown she decided was like a Japanese print,—a form of art to which she had been recently introduced. The unconsciousness of the woman wearing the gown disturbed the art student, who had been born for a more vigorous life than the contemplative one of art. Her face became aggressive.

A little further along a ruddy respectably dressed German studied the countess with the passionate unslakable curiosity of his race. Beside the German was a Lithuanian peasant, not evolved to the point of articulate thought, who stared also, but with the steady, unwinking gaze of a baby, caught by a color or light.

Between the Slavic peasant and a grimy workman with an arm full of tools protruding like antlers, was a small pale quietly dressed girl who reminded Nina of Bertha Rennels, the only real American beside herself that she had discovered so far in the car. The girl's modest dress was pale grey and a portion of the workman's greasy tools rested upon her lap, despite her vain efforts at withdrawal. She finally arose in an attempt at self-protection and the encroachments of her late neighbors swiftly covered the small space she had occupied.

What was it about her Nina Varesca wondered, that

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made these people, urban livers in the midst of changing sights and sounds, apparently so curious about her? Opposite her a conspicuously dressed brunette talked at the top of her lungs about intimate matters with encouraging glances at her neighbors. No one in the car vouchsafed her a glance. Evidently, like the attendants at the hotel, they did not wish to listen to those who craved an audience.

A sense of heavy pressure at her right made her aware of her immediate neighbor, another European peasant very dark and hatless, but wearing a long coat of the latest fashion, her arms filled with large bundles evidently the result of her afternoon's shopping. She looked like a Syrian or some other semi-Asiatic type.

On Nina's other side the feet of a dirty Italian child carelessly held by its mother sprawled over her delicate gown. Further down the car a wretchedly clad negro woman ate handfuls of food out of a tin pail which she held in her lap. These things did not inspire Nina Varesca with the merely fastidious recoil of the unthinking woman whose life has not touched dirt and disease, but there seemed to her something wrong, disorderly, askew about it all. The thought occurred to her that women as sensitively bred as herself, but less fortunate, women like Jane Worthing and Bertha Rennels had to endure these unclean, heavily physical contacts daily.

She turned to find the beady eyes of the German still upon her. If she could have read his thoughts they would, no doubt, have begun with a collection of whys

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and ended with an assortment of suspicions,—grotesque, minute, prosaic. Yet he was clean and had obviously the civic consciousness lacking in the other foreigners. The dark young shop girl in real furs, white kid and patent leather, was thinking scornfully that she was quite as well dressed as her vis-a-vis . . . that all people were alike in America . . . All Americans had been emigrants — money was the only difference. Yet the while something unnamed but resented, rankled in her mind and kept her unhappily staring.

The man who had given the countess his seat was speculating as to whether she would notice him when she realized that his flattering attention was focussed upon her. The dark peasant, relieving herself of the weight of her bundles at her neighbor's expense, did not know she was there, and the Italian woman thought she was "*multa bella*" and smiled shyly when their eyes met.

The car stopped with a jerk, throwing the man who stood before Nina against her. He apologized with saccharine smiles and a hand lingeringly withdrawn from her shoulder. She drew back to such extent as was possible and wondered if the car would ever reach Waverly Place.

Several more passengers had entered. One man standing upon the platform with his back toward her had a familiar look. He turned and she saw that it was Griscom — a third American! The next moment he recognized her and made his way to her side.

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"What an unlikely place to find you." His disturbed glance took in the choked squalid car, a veritable steerage.

"The most absurd accident," she said. "I got out without enough money for a cab."

"You might have taken a bus. They are overcrowded too, but not like this."

She laughed. "I hadn't even money enough for that. Isn't it too absurd! I had exactly five cents in my purse."

The standing gentleman listened with friendly interest, less insistent however, since the arrival of the other man.

"How far down are you going?"

"To Washington Square."

He glanced out. "It is only Seventeenth. Let's get out here, we can find a cab."

She rose, glad to obey the suggestion and at the next corner they struggled through the immovable crowd clogging the door and got out.

CHAPTER XVI

In the fresh air again, she drew a long breath. "I believe I will walk the rest of the way, the side street looks dryer here. Let's cross to the Avenue. That dreadful car! This is the first time I have taken one." They turned into the untidy side street that led to Fifth Avenue. It was lined with the signs of restaurants in strange tongues. "But how it has all changed! I remember when this was a nice street and when those cars were used by clean Americans! Why, Mildred and I were permitted to take them alone when we were half grown girls. Surely no American mother would feel comfortable to let her young daughter travel in one now."

"Well, you see, the slums of Europe have been pouring in ever since, and their children have been growing up — like this!" Griscom warded off collision with another weedy long-headed, tall-hatted youth whose physical energy all seemed centered in his extraordinarily active swagger.

"I suppose that is why they won't have any fresh air in the cars," Nina remarked. "It seems funny to have things like that in America. I used to have dreadful times with Mario's sisters and his mother about open windows." She laughed at the recollection. "But I

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won. They have no recourse now but to cough reproachfully. Mario went to an English school for a year or two and got somewhat accustomed to ventilation." She caught some changing light of expression in his face at the mention of her husband's name and returned to the less personal aspect. "And how these people stare! Not just inquisitively, but almost as if they hated one. In Europe it seems to me people of that sort are more interested in their own affairs."

"Yes. Well, you see these people are curious as you would be about a house you expected to live in. They see no difference between you and themselves except that between success and failure. If they are young and hopeful they think in a few years they will be exactly like you; all the plays on Broadway, the magazines, the moving pictures show that viewpoint. Meantime they envy you because you got there first. If they are not getting on they hate the person who looks prosperous to them. I have often noticed that curious resentment that the street hoodlum, male and female, seems to feel toward the well-dressed woman unless she is in a carriage or a motor. I suppose the motor being a symbol of wealth and power inspires awe even if it is a sullen one, but when they see you walking or traveling like themselves on a five cent carfare they feel at liberty to express their real feelings. The whole situation here is an unhappy upside down state of affairs sociologically."

"I suppose," Nina reflected, "that it is because the city is utterly non-homogeneous."

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" Principally that. Then New York seems to be divided into two classes,— the people that reverence money as their god, and people that hate those that have it — I am not sure that that makes two classes. I suppose really that there is more class discontent and unhappiness in America than anywhere in the world, because the second generation, these emigrants' children, have little or no balance. They are always attempting some work or position beyond them that they are not qualified for. They don't realize their unfitness and their poor souls become full of bitterness and hate when they fail to accomplish their end. Of course, however unfit they often succeed. New York is a paradise for the incompetent. The same thing is happening all over the country. The city is an epitome of the conditions of the country. It comes more slowly in the smaller places, that is all. It is just another of those invasions of the barbarians that recur periodically in history.

The woman's mind returned to the personal feminine phase of it. " But to think that women like Jane Worthing and Bertha Rennels,— sensitive dainty women — who can't afford the kind of clothes I see on the little foreign shop girls have to travel in that steerage and ruin perhaps their only good street gown. They ought to have second class cars — cheaper for such people."

He shook his head. " Fourth class without any seats would seem more natural to them, I fancy — half of them simply stand and choke up the entrance when there are plenty of seats — but I am afraid class divisions in

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street cars would never be accepted in this grotesque democracy."

"Why not? More than half of the people in that car were foreign emigrants."

"Yes, but the other half were their children; and no inhabitant of America is so insanely aggressive as the second-generation foreigner, especially a certain type or development of the most predominant alien race. As-sertiveness seems a sort of disease with them."

"You mean the Jews?"

"Yes. It may be a racial reaction from the long suppression. The kind of Hebrew we all object to seems to have an uncontrollably strong ego. He cannot endure not being seen and heard — which makes him something of a nuisance in public. It is a type bred in this country. The conditions of the old world do not permit of such diseased individualism. For one thing, the class of Jews that have been coming here recently are very different from the decent self-respecting German and English Jews that came here a generation ago; and the few Spanish Jews who were among our earlier settlers are of course the aristocracy of the race. I think the real trouble is that the objectionable type of Jew cannot seem to realize that his social unpopularity is due to his manners instead of his religion. America seems to bring out the worst side of the racial character in the second generation, especially when they abandon their religion. Like the majority of our hyphenate citizens they are an abnormal development, not a legitimate

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growth, that is the trouble. I believe the only person that can ever discipline them into proper shape is the kaiser that most of their parents came here to escape, and that they seldom lose a chance to applaud in public. It will be a sad but educational day for them if Wilhelm ever crosses the sea and takes possession of poor violated America!"

Nina laughed. "Still I don't believe I want him to come." They were at the still unspoiled lower end of the Avenue and were walking more slowly. "I never supposed I was interested in social problems," she said at last, "but I seem to be now. I think it is the feeling that here things are seething and changing and that there is work to be done — something perhaps to be saved for the race."

"That is it," Griscom said in his quiet voice, but with a light in his face. "There is some destructive, disintegrative force at work here — whether it has a definite idea behind it or whether it is just an accidental conflagration set by our barbarian invaders — that threatens to destroy the most precious heritage of our race, — the Anglo Saxon ideals inculcated in a great democracy. Such a democracy may not be practically possible but it is a beautiful dream and worth fighting for."

"It makes me feel that I have lived such a selfish personal life," she said in a low voice.

He gave her a quick look and turned away. When he spoke it was with a complete change of tone and subject.

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"Speaking of the personal life, have you decided what to do about your *bambino* in Italy?"

"We are going back in six weeks. Matters here seem to be moving a little. I shall not send for him."

Raising her eyes she found his upon her. She had the sense of something rising in them, something that she feared, like a great wave gathering, that overflowing, might overwhelm them both.

She looked away again then heard his voice: "Which way do you turn?" and realized that they had reached the north side of the square.

She replied, "To the left," but she stood still, looking at the park. A number of Italian children played about the bare basin of the fountain.

"Soon they will be setting out the tulips. And how your Italians do love it!" He turned toward her. "Do you want to walk through the park and see them?"

She hesitated. "You were going somewhere, weren't you? You came out of your way to rescue me."

"It can wait."

They walked almost across the square. The brown tree branches were touched with gold. There were vivid suggestions of green in the grass. The red brick house fronts of the North side glowed with the warm light of the late afternoon sun. Sodden wrecks of masculinity huddled on a row of benches marked "Reserved for the Use of Women and Children" discussed them as they passed. The voices of the playing children came toward them and he saw that she smiled.

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"*Il Dialetta di Napoli!*" she said. "You can tell by the rhythm before you hear the words. They amuse me, the Neapolitans. Mario, having Northern prejudices, hates them as a matter of conscience. Although, really, I think he has a great deal of the South in him."

He moved restlessly. "You scarcely ever hear any English in this park any more. Would you like to take a look at the absurd Garibaldi — for an extra touch of Italian color?"

They walked on toward the statue. A Neapolitan child squatted at its foot re-tying a withered piece of red tape upon a dusty black braid of hair. She smiled up at them showing white teeth. Nina addressed her in Italian and mechanically felt in her purse for soldi, forgetting for the moment her penniless condition. He drew some small change from his pocket.

"You want to give her something? You will probably have a little mob surrounding you."

She took a five cent piece and gave it to the child who exclaimed joyously, "*Gratia, bella Signorina, multa gratia.*"

"She called you Signorina," he said.

"A tribute that I am old enough to appreciate," she replied. Her eyes followed the rapidly disappearing figure of the child with a smile.

"You do love them, don't you?"

She noticed the sound in his voice. "Oh, yes. I love both countries. I always used to say that my heart was with Italy and my head with America, but now, I don't

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know; I seem to feel something that is not of the intellect pulling at me here. It is very disturbing to feel yourself torn between the two as I do."

He glanced at her, noting again the sensitive lines of the lips and nostrils. Others might be cognizant merely of the fine subtle mask of Nina Varesca's face, Daniel Griscom saw always the capacity for feeling underneath. "I should think that it would, on the contrary, give a larger horizon."

She shook her head. "When you are the mother of two boys, it becomes something more than a matter of tastes and preferences."

The admission, although undefined, startled him. "Are they not quite entirely Italian?" he said.

"They are my children. They must have something of the American spirit in them."

"But doesn't environment count most?"

She smiled whimsically, yet there was a serious look in her eyes. "You seem to ignore me as part of their environment."

He looked at her and speculated as he often had about her life, its adjustments, its possible loneliness. Yet with the undiscerning eyes of the man in love he saw her as entirely happy.

"That thing that I feel over here," she said after a moment, "that conflict, the something to be achieved — or conquered, has taken so strong a hold of me that when I stop to think, it gives me a pang to realize that Paolo cannot be an American."

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somehow over the absurd little transaction each glanced away from the other's eyes.

She gave him her hand and he held it an instant. Her farewell was conventional and composed, but she entered the Wickhams' wide hall scarcely aware of the transition. That strong hand-clasp — how she felt it through her glove! A man of that sort would never go to pieces over a woman like an Italian man. A woman would only own a fraction of a man like Daniel Griscom. Yet what was it Jane Worthing had said — that with American men love might be as permanently important as it was in a woman's life — when there was companionship, a life interwoven, when they recognized the same gods.

She found herself greeting and being greeted by Edith Wickham and thrusting aside other impressions she seated herself in the spacious, serene drawing-room, built in the leisurely days when New York was an American city, prepared to enjoy a visit with her old friend. Limited at certain points Edith Wickham might seem to her, not immature, as Mildred was, but lacking in some way in the larger awareness of life. Yet in her presence she had always a sense of reaching a quiet spot of wide, cool spaces after the flashing colors and constant movement of a crowd.

There were tinges of Victorianism, middle and late, in Edith's drawing-room. Oddly she felt them as soothing.

This was the New York she had left. It was not a dream after all. It was that choked car, that squalidly prosperous Avenue that were the nightmare!

CHAPTER XVII

In the older, more conservative hotel to which they had removed after a month of richly upholstered discomfort at The Waltham, Nina was agreeably conscious of a more dignified atmosphere. Her rooms, larger and less pretentiously decorated than those she had left, were full of sunshine. The boys who answered the bell were Irish and able therefore to understand and answer questions. Altogether it seemed to Nina to promise more serenity than the palatial Waltham, which, constructed as if for the entertainment of kings, served its guests either with inefficient officiousness or with a haphazard carelessness more suggestive of a railway restaurant than an expensive hotel.

It was well past tea time the afternoon after her chance meeting with Griscom, when Assunta came from the telephone with the announcement that Signor Loring was calling.

"Signor — and Signora?" Nina questioned.

Assunta insisted that the hotel clerk had said "Meester."

Nina decided that the Italian girl had not understood. It must be either Mildred alone or Mildred and Percy together. Perhaps Mildred had repented her coldness of

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the day before. Percy would hardly venture to call again alone.

"Say that I am at home," she instructed the maid, and a moment later Percy Loring admitted by Assunta loomed impressively in the doorway.

"I have found you out! The flight of the countess has been discovered!" He raised the roguish finger. "You see you cannot run away from me."

"I am sure I had no intention of running away from anyone," was Nina's response to this arch challenge. "But where is Mildred? Why isn't she with you?"

Percy deposited his hat carefully, preserving a white paper package in his immaculately gloved hands. "Mildred—why, little Mildred was not at home when I left. Do you reproach me for coming alone, contessa? Are we not cousins?"

Without passing upon the intimate matter of relationship Nina replied, "I had taken it for granted that she would be with you."

Percy fixed his large eyes upon her. They were not expressive eyes, but at this moment there was a marked brightness about them. "The contessa accords me but a chill reception, and yet—" his tone passed from reproachful apostrophe to that of personal appeal, "I come bearing gifts." There was a noble pathos about this concluding declaration. As he made it he put the heavy package in her hands with a low stiff bow.

She untied the string to find three of the author's novels handsomely bound, inscribed inside in a careful

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cramped writing, "To my cousin the Contessa Nina Varesca from her sincere appreciator, Percy Chatfield Loring."

"This will be something to look forward to," she murmured.

Percy's face glowed. In the purely formal courtesy of acceptance he was able to feel the sincerest tribute to his greatness. He sat slightly forward upon his chair, both gloved hands crossed upon his cane, his pose rather suggesting that his seat was not comfortable, and unwinkingly surveyed his hostess in her slightly décolleté afternoon gown of an uncertain shimmering green.

"I appreciate the interior effect," he remarked.

She glanced about the room. "It is not bad. The American hotels, so far as their appointments are concerned, are a revelation to a European. We found the service very crude at the Waltham. The bell boys were all foreign and couldn't even page a guest intelligibly. But it seems to be rather better here."

"I referred to the lady. This is the first time I have seen you in costume —" he made a stiff gesture, defining with a touch of crispness for her dullness.

"A fact that should go upon record." She turned the pages of a book. "'The Silver Cloud.' But you have very kindly given me a copy of that already. I have just finished it."

Percy flushed faintly. "Oh-ah — the clerk must have made a mistake. Is 'The Shadow Rose' there?" Percy

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peered anxiously at the imposing pile of freshly bound volumes.

The countess glanced at the titles. "No, it doesn't seem to be."

"That is it then." The author looked relieved. "That stupid clerk put it in instead of 'The Shadow Rose.' Then you have read my 'Silver Cloud'—" The author's head dropped slightly to one side. "Now you appreciate the name perhaps —"

"I — I think so." The countess was properly tentative.

The author's eyes became fixed and dreamy. "It is symbolic — you understand that? We have all heard of the silver lining — but the ability of the rare soul to see, to realize, that the very cloud *itself* is silver—" he paused, leaving time for the stupendous idea to sink in. "You catch my meaning? It is subtle, yet I dare hope it will carry."

"That is the ultimate optimism, is it not?" The countess again paid courteous attention to the books. "Are they all novels?"

Percy's expression became profound. "Yes. My most recent output — but not so very recent. They call me the lapidary. I carve so finely and slowly. And this last year I have not worked so much. Matrimony is an absorbing occupation."

"You call it an occupation?"

"Nay, rather a sacred service." There was a pause. "What would you call it?"

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"A profession," she suggested with what Percy called her frivolity. She found the author's eyes upon her with the expression that angered her.

"Ah, most fascinating of women, you had thought that out before! It was never spontaneous. Who said it first?"

"Do I seem incapable of original utterance?"

Percy Loring's slow skeptical side movement of the head indicated reluctance to contradict. Facility, quick retort of any sort always affected him unfavorably, his own mind working slowly and in grooves. He turned upon her suddenly although the speech had framed itself deliberately.

"How would you classify your own matrimonial venture in epigram? As an episode, I suppose?"

Convinced of the brilliancy and originality of his phrase, the author's good humor returned for a moment, but at her reply his expression again changed.

"In my own case? Oh, Mario and I are too full of bourgeois content to make epigrams about ourselves."

Percy Loring's lip lifted, then tightened. "Indeed — I had supposed the count too much a man of the world — the Italian husbands are not notorious for their attentions to their wives."

To which Nina returned at her leisure, "Perhaps we generalize too much. The nations have their special characteristics, of course, but there are always exceptions. Are you a novelist, pure and simple, Mr. Loring? Do not be offended at my ignorance. You know I see little

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pompous compliments. When the door had closed upon him, Mario turned upon his wife with a frown. "He comes without his wife. Is that the American custom?"

"*Dipende.*" Nina's response was serene. "We consider it quite correct with old friends or connections. As my cousin's husband he would naturally consider it permissible. But if I had known that Mildred was not with him, I certainly would not have seen him." This statement Mario received with characteristic skepticism, as also her added declaration, "I find him quite preposterous. Poor little Mildred, I wonder how long she can keep on making a hero out of him!"

"Are you really so fond of her?" Mario was still unconvinced. "I find her altogether stupid. She has no conception of how to use her beauty. She is like one of your new millionaires who does not know the value of his art objects."

"American women are not invariably coquettish, Mario. Many of them are utterly devoid of it. Mildred is that kind. I admit that she is literal and philistine; but I remember how she shared all her little things with me when I went into her home, a desolate motherless child. She should have married someone like that clean-minded, apple-cheeked Western boy that Fair Randolph had with her that first Sunday."

"It would seem that she might easily have chosen someone more desirable than that old *Gato*."

"Mario! Perhaps he is not so bad as you think."

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"Worse probably. A pent-up stream runs deep. I suppose he had Puritan fathers."

Nina looked distressed. "I can't bear to think of it." She moved restlessly across the room. Her husband's eyes followed her. After all these years of married life a woman should not be a riddle to her husband. It was not natural, not right. She should be like clear glass. . . .

"He is mad about you, I can see it in his eyes. You know it," he said moodily.

A little shiver of disgust passed over her face. "He is too odious." Her expression served to reassure her husband temporarily, at least, as her words had not done. He rose, went over to her side and slipped his arm about her.

"At least I give him credit for sufficient good taste to desire you," he said.

Her face contracted with an uncontrollable revulsion. "Mario, please — don't say things like that." He looked up at her, his mood of reassurance strengthened; and smiling down at him she put her hand in his thick hair shaking his head lightly as she might have done with a child or a favorite dog. He took down her hand, crushing it in his. She felt the return of the jealous doubt.

"When the old count first saw you he said that you were a dangerous woman." He stared at her, frowning darkly.

She rubbed his coat-sleeve affectionately. "But time has proved that I am quite harmless."

"It has shown — so far — that I can trust you."

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“ ‘So far,’ oh you Italian!”

“ But somehow — it is curious — I realize that dangerous quality of yours more here in your own country, where the blood we are told runs more slowly.”

“ Well, well, and why is that I wonder.” It was the tone of one humoring a child.

“ Because, I suppose, there is something here among your people that I don’t understand. It makes me feel that I don’t understand you.”

“ And you felt before that you did understand me?”

His jealousy and suspicion flamed up. “ You think I did not! I daresay you are right. I do not know what goes on in your head.”

“ So long as you know what goes on in my heart —”

“ But do I? *Proviamo!*”

“ Othello!” She made affectionate pretense of smoothing out his frown.

“ Kiss me.”

She kissed him lightly on the frowning brows.

“ Again, not like that.”

She hesitated. The telephone bell rang. She moved as if to answer it, but his clasp tightened. “ The telephone —”

“ Assunta will answer it.”

“ She will be in here any minute. Mario, what is the matter? I thought we had got beyond all this.”

The bell rang again; then they heard the sound of footsteps in the hall and Assunta’s voice answering “ Allo.” He released her with an exclamation and turn-

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ing his back upon the room began to drum violently on the window sill. Assunta appeared at the door and announced in her own language:

"A lady to speak with the count. She gives no name."

Mario exclaimed dramatically: "Let her then remain nameless! I do not wish to speak with her. Say I am not at home."

"Mario, dear," his wife interposed, "I think it is the same one who called up yesterday and this morning. I told her you would be home the latter part of the afternoon. This is the third or fourth time she has tried to get you. I think you had better go."

Mario shrugged, denounced his caller in a flood of polite invective, but in the end, rather as if he were a coerced child than her husband, obeyed. He returned almost immediately with eyes glittering triumphantly.

"*Ecco!* We shall see if she will call me again immediately! Yes, yes, it was the little Lois with the large mouth and the long eyes, the *orchiacina*. I have reproved her as a father."

"She may justly account you a fickle admirer, Mario. Only day before yesterday —"

"Yesterday, day before yesterday, *Dio, Dio!* This is not yesterday; this is to-day! And if it *were* yesterday, then is it not your urgent wish that I do not trifle with the affections of the tender little innocent who pursues me unblushingly like a *cocotte!*"

Silenced as Mario was not by justice or logic in a retort Nina did not answer at once. She watched him a

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moment as he restlessly paced the floor. "But she is not a *cocotte*, Mario," she said at last, "as I have tried to make you understand. It is the girl's breeding that is at fault. You deal with her rather extremely, do you not?"

He wheeled about with a gesture. "No more of the *orchacina*, I beg. Why do you talk of her to me? To hold me off, to distract me — I understand! You know I could not care about a woman like that,—a peasant girl of Tuscany has more lure,—do not pretend to believe I care . . . do not think to make excuse." He broke into a flood of passionate Italian. "It is you, only you, who can tear at my heart. . . . Oh, you still white one, with the sphinx eyes and flower lips, mine and not mine. Why did I have to love you — you — why not a soft woman of my own people who would have loved as I love —"

"She would have bored you, Mario. Don't be theatrical —"

"*Basta* — 'theatrical,' am I? Now when I speak of love to my wife I am theatrical! But once — once —" Mario continued to rave and Nina sat silent, thinking how best to meet this outburst that, although familiar, came to her now with a new sense of shock as when, a young American girl bred in the Anglo-Saxon restraints and inhibitions, it had seemed to her an actual immodesty to show feeling like that.

In the midst of Mario's tirade the telephone rang again, and at Assunta's entrance he became silent.

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"The Signora Loring wishes to speak with the con-
tessa."

Grateful for even a temporary respite Nina left the room, leaving the door open, however, so that Mario might hear all that she said.

She inquired at once why Mildred had not come with her husband to see her in her new quarters. She noted a slight constraint in Mildred's tone as she answered:

"I did not know Percy had called. But he said the other day that you had asked him to drop in. I didn't just understand when."

"I have never given him any invitation that did not include you." Nina put it definitely, if still lightly, although uncomfortably conscious of Mario's probable interpretation of what he overheard. "If Percy thought so he has misunderstood in some way."

"Well, I know you said nothing about it to me yesterday morning." Mildred's tone was certainly chilly.

"No, because I did not expect to see either of you. But surely you don't need a special invitation, Milly dear."

"It was a misunderstanding —" Mildred's voice came through the receiver primly, "but I called up to ask you about the opera this evening. You are going, aren't you, in Cousin Emma's box. She said you were. She has just telephoned to say that she has a cold and is staying home, and that two of her guests have been obliged to drop out at the last minute; so she has asked Percy and me, and there is an extra seat. Mario accepted also, she said."

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"I know he did, but he sometimes changes his mind. Wait, I'll ask him. Mario —" she called to her husband. "You are going to the opera with me to-night?"

"The opera? No."

"It is Caruso —" She had hoped that this usually welcome suggestion might turn the current of his mood, but she realized at once from the tone of his answer that the hope was vain.

"I shall not go. I do not want to. I am going somewhere with Rizzi."

Nina explained to her cousin, "He has made some other engagement!"

"Another engagement!" Mildred's tone expressed a disapproving surprise. "When he had accepted this one! Then shall you go alone or do you want to ask someone?"

"I would like to ask Bertha Rennels," Nina suggested.

"Bertha Rennels — I don't know —" Mildred hesitated. "Percy doesn't seem to enjoy talking with her much. He says she has a sharp little tongue —"

"She has a quick one."

"Oh, I don't agree with Percy. I don't think he quite understands Bertha. But the waits are awfully long this year, so one wants congenial people —"

Nina interrupted Mildred's uncomfortable apologies. "Then will *you* fill both seats, Milly dear? You have so many friends here."

She returned to her husband. He was frowning. Mario's eyes had no suggestion of the cast which in vary-

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ing degrees is so usual among French and Italian people, but as he turned toward her now they had that narrowed suggestion of one that gave him what she called his wicked look, the sinister expression of one of the old Medici portraits.

"You go with them, then?" he asked.

"Would you have me stay home alone?"

He turned in the direction of his dressing-room. "I don't know what time I shall get back."

"You will be out to dinner?"

"Yes."

"*Buon divertimento*," she returned. But the count's perfectly decorous exit had somehow the effect of a slammed door. His wife smiled, then shivered.

Lois was satisfactorily disposed of now. This mood of Mario's directed toward herself had always quickly extinguished his lighter loves. There was no danger now of the situation she dreaded. What was it then that caused this sinking of the heart? Why did she dread even more having Mario's attention focussed upon herself? Was it that she despised this game, this game of sex that she was condemned to play to preserve her domestic harmony? After the torturing jealousy of her awakening in the first year of her marriage, all sense of possession in Mario had died in her. Later this other affection that she now felt for him had come to take its place. Mario had no brutality in his nature. By his standard he was far from being a libertine. Occasionally he indulged in small adventures,—it was so that he

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phrased it. His love-making had often bored her — especially in the last few years; but it had not repelled her. She had accepted it rather than desired it, but without repulsion, sometimes even with response to its compelling vividness. She was a woman whose inner being, however covered from the world, demanded love, and so, often she had accepted this lover's love of his, shutting off the voice of that mental self that demanded something different, something in which it also might merge and lose itself. But now she did not want this purely emotional love of Mario's. She did not want him to kiss her. She did not want it. . . . It had taken all her will power not to tear herself from his arms. What had changed her? What had made her feel like this?

He tired her . . . she had often felt that before without permitting herself to dwell upon the fact. That essentially Latin attitude of his — if one took it seriously — was a wound to dignity, to self-respect. He had found that he could trust her — “so far.” There were no final dispositions, settlements in his creed, to his temperament. No fixed faith, no certainties. It was a world of the emotions expressed in absolute statements that were never final; a fluid world without boundaries or foundations. It was not restful, it was not the way of her people. His gods were not her gods — in their souls they were strangers.

She caught herself there and with a movement as though she brushed aside some tangible thing, rang the bell for her maid.

CHAPTER XVIII

She was the last to arrive, although the overture had not yet begun. Beside Mildred, Percy and Creston — temporarily returned to bachelor's estate by one of Mrs. Creston's periodic Boston visits — she noted that the box contained Griscom and Taylor Maddox, invited at the author's suggestion as a reward for his article comparing Percy Loring's prose to the nocturnes of Chopin. "He will like to be seen in our box," was Percy's benevolent reflection as he watched his nonchalant guest — who, it seemed, after all, took his honors easily.

"You find us unfashionably prompt," Percy remarked in his high voice, as he rose in stiff salutation. "We are, you see, music lovers rather than over-worked slaves of fashion."

As Nina took the seat left vacant for her beside Mildred she noticed that Griscom was in the back seat at her right. Creston, the masculine guest selected by his host for the honor of the front seat, was on Mildred's other side. She turned to Griscom after the general greetings were over.

"Not in the Balkans yet."

"No, just embarking for Italy."

"Italy," she gave a little start.

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"Didn't you notice that the opera had been changed? It is 'Bohème' instead of 'Manon.'"

"'Bohème'—with Caruso?" He nodded. "What a pity Mario did not know."

"But he had an engagement," the conscientious Mildred reminded her.

"He would probably have broken it. His conscience is of the artistic Latin variety."

"I envy him. But it takes an Italian to keep on good terms with that kind of a conscience," said Creston.

Percy Loring shook his head. "All very well till the day of reckoning."

Nina laughed. "They postpone it — *che tempo*."

Percy's gaze, disapproving, yet somewhat weakened by uncertainty, remained for a time upon her face, then traveled to her gold-colored gown and such portions of her uncovered person as were visible. Maddox was also looking at the gown but with frank speculation as to its value. It looked priceless to him yet he had discovered by inquiry at the hotel desk and in the lobby that the count and countess were not "rich." That fact caused him to feel much more at ease in their presence.

"It is your belief in your sins that scars the soul," observed Griscom. "If you don't feel wicked I expect you escape the greater part of the penalty."

"Dangerous ground, young man," Percy gently warned him. "The doctrine of individual morality isn't a safe one to preach."

Nina looked from the staunch moralist to his cour-

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teously attentive publisher and again wondered what Creston really thought of Percy Loring.

"Hasn't someone said that sin is a matter of geography?" she remarked. "Oriental ideas of sin are often the exact opposite of ours — harakiri, for example."

"But haven't we got our own little harakiri codes when the world hurts our feelings?" said Maddox. "And our natural laws that permit a man to kill his successful rival?"

Nina, about to respond in kind, caught sight of Mildred's face sober and disturbed over this flippant treatment of life's problems, and remarked instead that the opera was about to begin. As she spoke the conductor raised his baton and a flood of passionate melody rose and encompassed them. She glanced at Griscom and found his eyes upon her.

"Do you like 'Bohème'?" she asked him. "I believe this is the first time we have heard music together."

"You forget the goat bells up the mountain." She shook her head. "You used to call them ice bells."

"There are no ice bells in this music. . . . What an unreal fairy sound it was. Everything was unreal up there."

"Everything?"

His question held no emphasis, yet she glanced away from his eyes and answered as literally as Mildred might have done. "Everything in nature seems unreal up near the summer snows. All the sounds and all the look of

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things. Do you love 'Bohème'? — you didn't tell me — or are you sorry it isn't something else?"

"I don't think I am one to like this and not like that. I care for all kinds of music with the exception of parts of darkest Brahms and disciplinary Beethoven."

"Vandalism," remarked Percy Loring, who seemed to be sharing their conversation.

"Percy doesn't care for anything but the most severely classical music," Mildred informed them with an air of pride. "He really martyred himself to-night."

"Hardly, in consideration of the company," the courtly Percy edited her crude statement.

The music rose in a passionate crescendo and dropped into haunting sadness, presaging the love story of the light-hearted, ill-fated lovers, and Nina exclaimed, "Oh, why are we talking!"

The curtain went up, disclosing the painter and the poet in their attic. The countrymen of the great tenor greeted him with their tumultuous enthusiasm, temporarily drowning the music. Percy Loring frowned and lifted a fastidious hand of disapproval. "And you call those people musical!" he apostrophized.

Nina smiled. "The blessed children, that is their way of enjoying it. After all — we have talked all through the overture." Her comment brought a skeptical smile to Percy Loring's face.

"The lady doth protest too much. It is difficult to believe that any American girl should become so entirely denationalized."

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She met the ponderous sally with her lightness. "Oh, I am not denationalized. It doesn't mean that I have cast off America because I love Italy, does it?"

The tenor had begun a ravishing phrase, Percy raised an admonishing hand that seemed to place the answerer of his remark in the class of the soulless chatterbox, and Nina thankfully abandoned herself to enjoyment of the music. No one spoke again till the end of the act. It was in the middle of Rudolfo's impassioned song, "*Che gelida Manina*"—that her eyes met Griscom's, a meeting that left her breathless. She had the sensation of being swept up and carried to some nameless regions of space. What wild impossible vistas had each in that brief instant glimpsed within the other's eyes! Her lids fell and she heard the rapid hammerlike beating of her heart. It seemed as if he, Percy Loring—everyone must hear it. Then the curtain was down, and wild applause and bravos were breaking the spell of the music.

"You are enjoying it?" Maddox leaned forward to ask.

"Enjoying it!" she repeated his words. With the sound of her own voice her self-command returned to her. "Caruso and Puccini combined are a tremendous sensation."

"Does it make you homesick for Italy?" Creston leaned forward to ask her.

She flashed a glance at him. "How did you know?"

"But you couldn't hear Caruso in Italy," observed

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Maddox. There was a childish complacent patriotism in his smile.

"American dollars make Italian romance possible," observed Creston.

Percy Loring's face lighted. "In other ways than opera," he observed significantly. "If our girls but knew —"

"Yes, I fear there are few of them who are won, like the contessa, by an adoring prince with coronet, gold and devotion," remarked Maddox, unconscious that his amiable desire to be flatteringly personal, if in somewhat doubtful taste, had served to deflect the author's intended shaft. Nina, aware of all inflections and directions, hastened to turn the conversation into less personal channels.

"I wonder if I meant it when I said I was homesick for Italy. Does one enjoy most the reality or the mirage of art that calls it up?"

"This man's singing isn't art," Percy declared; "it is an accident." He had heard the comment applied to another singer. "The man has no soul." The vertical lines on either side of his small mouth lifted as he expressed his distaste.

"Is that how he seems to you?" said the countess. "When I hear him, I see Naples,—the sea, the sky, the sunshine, the lovers, the naughty happy children. Ah, *bella Napoli* —"

"The light tragedy of the South," said Percy Loring. It was another phrase that had done good service.

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"I agree with the contessa," said Creston. "There is something in Caruso's voice — there is no reasoning about it, it just is."

"It has beauty, I admit," Percy blandly agreed with his publisher, "but it is the purely sensuous beauty of the South." He pushed out his lips contemptuously on the consonants.

"Whatever you call it," said Nina, "there is nothing else in the world like it."

"The contessa has the enthusiasm of the convert." Percy Loring smiled.

"Yes, I love Italy," replied Nina. "I don't see how anyone with a soul could help it."

"I should say it was rather a matter of senses than soul," Percy Loring analyzed carefully.

"Many people mistake one for the other," observed Creston in his quick voice. "Yet in the grasp of beauty, surely both are involved."

"It depends," Griscom spoke from the shadow, "upon whether one has only senses or senses plus what we call soul to understand with. The countess, we may be sure, Loring, sees something in her Italy that you and I are not able to appreciate — that ineffable something that has drawn the poets and artists of all ages."

Percy Loring fidgeted in his chair and Mildred, listening with parted lips, looked as if a sacrilege had been uttered. "Surely no one could have finer appreciations than Percy," she said with her occasional incredible naïveté.

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"My dear partisan child," Loring exclaimed hastily, and the tactful Creston added:

"There is one at least in this cynical old world who wears her heart upon her sleeve! But, dear Mrs. Loring, no one's appreciations were in question. We were just matching up favorites. The contessa and I are for Caruso, and Mr. Loring, as I understand it, prefers the fine art of Vernet, the new French tenor."

Maddox, who had only caught the end of this remark, quite unintentionally frustrated the publisher's amiable diplomacy. "But the musicians say that it is all bunkum about his art. They say that he sings off the key—awfully off." Maddox announced it in his most definite manner.

"French singers often do, don't you think?" Nina rather hastily interposed. "But they give us something else, do they not?—in spite of it." Then she abandoned the conversation, once more becoming uncomfortably personal, and turned to Griscom. For some time she had been almost painfully conscious of his presence. Was he thinking about her? What was he thinking? What was that quality in people like a magnetic aura that could make one conscious of their presence like that? She met his eyes and spoke.

"You haven't seen Paolo yet; he has asked for you so often. He was so disappointed to miss you that afternoon."

"I must see him, I want to see him," said Griscom. "I got his dear little letter."

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"He was so proud of writing it."

Percy's cool smile interposed between them. "Griscom in the character of child lover? Isn't this a new phase?"

"Children are certainly devoted to him," said Nina.

"Paolo isn't like other children," said Griscom. "He is in the class with elves and flowers and other things not quite real."

"Sounds like the description of a little girl," commented Percy.

Griscom smiled. "He is not as noisy as most American children, but he is none the less all boy."

"You should write a book for children, Loring," Creston interposed. "A juvenile, in the language of the trade."

While Percy was describing his distaste for the classifications of the trade, and explaining the various phases of his conviction about writing or not writing a story for "the child," as he called it, Nina turned again to Griscom.

"He really wants terribly to see you, my *bambino*," she said. He did not answer, and she turned to look at him. Then for the third time that strange sensation that was almost panic swept over her as their eyes met. It was like an impulse to escape. But from what? How absurd. . . . She had felt like that once before — a long time ago, the first time she had been left alone with Mario and he had spoken to her. But that was different. She had been an inexperienced girl then — She realized

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that Griscom had answered her, the meaning of his words came to her afterwards. . . . The curtain was descending now, the singers were before the curtain bowing their acknowledgments. She replied to some remark of Mildred's at random and found her cousin's childlike eyes upon her with a puzzled expression.

Griscom arose, excusing himself, and left the box. Creston engaged Percy Loring's attention. Maddox entertained Mildred and Nina with an account of a picturesque young American painter recently arrived "from the wild and woolly," as he somewhat disloyally characterized it. His account was couched in the phrases of current slang adorned with bits of studio jargon that he had picked up in his wanderings on the outskirts. He believed his description to be "full of color," and from the expression on the contessa's enigmatic face fancied that he was delighting her with the piquancy of his anecdotal powers. Mildred's dark eyes conscientiously fixed upon his face, heightened his innocent self-satisfaction. In reality neither of them heard a word he said, for even Mildred, who dutifully listened to everyone, was disturbed by some vague discomfort. . . . It was because her Percy was intellectually so far above the rest of the world that, it seemed, they could not always follow him, and so — not understanding — disputed his decisions as equal beings might with one another.

Madame La Vallière from some region above, a trifle vaguely indicated in her allusion, called upon them during the *entre acte*, a voluble call of which Nina retained

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only a confused memory of compliments to the author and the usual violent arraignment of American taste.

"Actually, dear madame," she addressed Mildred, "women *eating* in the boxes at the Parsifal matinée yesterday. Oh, these American manners!"

"Three very dark women in red and black with gold spangles who sat in a box above this?" Maddox suddenly directly questioned her — his first acknowledgment of her presence.

His specific statement combined with what she supposed to be concordance in her attack, lured Madame La Vallière into premature admission.

"I saw them," Maddox stated it tersely, "and they were so far from being American that they couldn't even speak English. I heard them trying to buy their food, and afterwards saw them falling upon it in their box."

"We do not mean the same ones," Madame answered hastily after an outraged stare at the unpleasantly ready journalist, and again turned her attentions upon Percy Loring.

When she had departed Maddox remarked with something more than such impersonal directness as might be permitted the habit of the journalist, "I don't know much about Frenchies, but there seems to me something suspicious about *that* one!"

"She is not French, but Greek," Mildred explained a little formally. She did not altogether care for Maddox.

"Wasn't she, at last bulletin, Turkish?" Despite her

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inability to accept Maddox, Nina was entertained.

Percy, who seldom answered promptly, spoke now. "Of course we have our bogus counts and spurious marchesas," his eye for an instant rested upon his wife's cousin, "but this delightful lady is only an unpretentious madame. On what ground do we suspect her authenticity?"

It is doubtful if Maddox was conscious of any of the directions of this speech. His answer was offhand. "Know anything about her, Loring?" he asked genially, restraining an impulse to tilt his frail gilt chair backwards.

Mildred's face expressed nothing short of horror at this. It took Percy a full minute to answer with praiseworthy composure and dignity: "I am not in the habit of accepting people of whose antecedents and claims I know nothing." It was a rebuke certainly, but not a harsh one. Percy was not one rashly to deny the power of the press.

But Maddox, secure in *his* belief in the power of the press to make or unmake the Percy Loring of this world, took the author's rebuke with odious casualness.

"That so? Lucky if you can make it a habit. Undesirable acquaintances are accidents that can occur in the best regulated families."

It was, Mildred felt, time for her to enter the arena more decisively. "We met Madame La Vallière at Mrs. Wilmot's." She stated it quietly. "We don't know her at all well. Mrs. Wilmot seems to be very fond of her."

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"Mrs. Lawrence Wilmot's?" Maddox frankly, as he would have expressed it, "nailed it," then he smiled knowingly. "Of course Mrs. Wilmot is a woman of unquestioned position." Maddox sounded the first syllable of the last word as if it were a separate word. "But I hear that she has a pretty freaky lot at her house. I am not surprised if *that* is where you found her."

Nina, somewhat startled at this frank manner of statement which she found, to state it at its mildest, extraordinary, was yet amused by the journalist's relentless exposition of the facts in their true light.

"This is really a very foreign looking audience," she remarked to change the subject, "even in the boxes; almost entirely so in the grand tier. I am surprised at that."

"It *is* foreign," Maddox informed her. "You can hear almost any language being jabbered out in the corridors there — not only Italian and German and English — but Choctaws you can't label at all — at least I can't."

"Opera has always been rather a cosmopolitan institution, hasn't it?" It was Creston who spoke. "Singers, orchestra conductors — and managers, too, of late years."

"Yes, but not the audience," Maddox replied; "certainly not as it is now. The managers are kind to their friends and the company's friends, no doubt, on an unpopular night; that is why we see such queer costumes sometimes on the women, but that isn't the whole story. Lots of foreigners pay for their seats and expensive

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ones, too, that came to this country in the steerage. It sure is the land of opportunity."

"But it is nice of them to spend their money that way," said Nina.

"Ah, yes; we see more of the simple people of the old world in America than of the so-called higher classes." Percy spoke with the tone that his admirers found so beautiful, but the glance that traveled to the contessa's face did not altogether match the tone. "The aristocratic counts and contessas do not favor us so often. A contessa is a cherished rarity."

"Oh, but you know counts are as thick as daisies in Italy." Nina's careless answer seemed to Mildred a most ungracious acknowledgment of Percy's stately tribute.

"Countless counts, eh?" suggested the lounging Maddox.

The Montmartre scene had begun when Griscom returned. At the conclusion of the baritone repetition of Musetta's tumultuous waltz, the refrain that runs through the act, Nina turned to him.

"How could you miss all that heavenly music!"

He looked at her, then glanced quickly aside. "I have decided to miss more of it."

"You are going now?" She looked away from him. "But why? Please don't."

"I shouldn't have come," he said.

"Do you have to go? Or are you just — tired?"

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She was pressing it a little; she realized it with her subjective sense, and asked herself why.

He did not answer. Something seemed to beat in the music-filled atmosphere.

"Please stay to put me in my cab. . . . Or else —" She glanced in the direction of Percy Loring suggesting her distaste for the alternative. She saw that Griscom was not himself. That subjective sense of hers understood — why then did she urge it? He spoke without raising his eyes.

"There are others who will sue for the privilege of escorting you."

She answered in a low voice. "I want you." Afterwards it seemed to her that some other will than her own had spoken.

Without meeting her eyes he yielded. "I will stay."

Percy Loring seemed to have clairvoyantly divined the nature of their conversation. "The contessa has not forgotten her promise to sup with us after the opera, I trust?"

"Did I promise? I think we must have misunderstood each other. I am afraid I can't. I have been such a dissipated lady lately that I have decided to be very firm to-night and resist temptation."

"Then you must let me see you safely home. Mr. Maddox and Mr. Creston will look after Mildred. *They* are not refusing our hospitality."

"Oh, thank you, no. It is only necessary for someone

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to put me in my cab. I am not accustomed — indeed we reckon it quite unconventional in Italy to be escorted.”

“*Honi soit qui mal y pense*,” returned the author. “You are in the land of pure intentions now, fair contessa.”

“I hope for the sake of my native land,” remarked Maddox, “that they are not synonymous with good ones. We all know what country *they* pave.”

And Mildred, withdrawing inwardly from the conversation, looked at her husband’s high forehead and thought how far above these petty frivolous spirits he was. She was disappointed in Nina. She seemed to have lost her ideals. Percy’s estimate of her must after all be the right one.

“I claim at least the honor of escort to the cab,” Percy Loring was persistent.

“That privilege has already been conferred upon me.” Griscom spoke without emphasis, but with a note of certainty that the sensitively organized author found disconcerting.

He turned to Nina. “Is this true, contessa — Nina?”

“I have always found Mr. Griscom a perfectly truthful person.” As always, her lightness baffled him.

Then the curtain rose on the artist’s attic and they listened in silence to the music. In the midst of a ravishing pianissimo phrase of the lover’s last duo they heard an animated voice from the next box:

“I *always* go after she takes the muff —”

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At Musetta's entrance Nina rose. "What, you are not going now!" her zealous host exclaimed.

"Like our neighbor," Nina smiled, extending her hand, "I never can bear to see Mimi die."

She made her gracious adieus and withdrew into the anteroom of the box; Percy Loring followed.

"At least I may help you on with your wrap—" but it was already in Griscom's hands. He raised an arch finger of accusation. "It is easy to see who wears your favor for the evening." Then he returned to the box.

"Something must have ruffled our author's amour propre this evening," observed Griscom as they walked along the corridor. "I am afraid you are the guilty one."

"I am afraid it is easily ruffled," she answered.

CHAPTER XIX

"I told the man to wait on the opposite corner," said Nina. "I detest standing in this lobby when it is crowded, and Mario usually insists upon staying till the end."

He guided her competently with a strong hand through the maze of street cars and motors. He found the cab at once and gave her address to the driver, then stood with bared head, extending his hand. Again she was conscious, as she took it, of his control, for his hand closed over hers without pressure, the impersonal adieu of a friend. She recalled the look in his eyes in the opera house. Now he was calm, conventionally smiling. She had not known men like this. . . . A perverse impulse that she did not analyze until afterwards overcame her. She detained his hand lightly an instant.

"Come with me," she said. "Take me all the way home."

Some of the change she had anticipated came into his face. He withdrew his hand hurriedly. An Italian would have increased his pressure. He looked away from her; then turned suddenly and faced her. "Why?"

She leaned back. From the concealing darkness came her voice, low, charged with enchantment. "Because I

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want you." Then as he still hesitated, "Isn't that reason enough?"

He turned upon her, shaken visibly, but grave almost stern. "Yes, surely, reason enough," he said, and stepped inside the door, closing it behind him. When they had gone on for a short distance in silence he turned to her. "I don't understand you. You know what you can do to me but why do you want to? I had believed you to be above that weakness."

She laughed softly, a laugh of self-mockery.

"You are laughing at me," he said quickly. "I don't wonder. I had not supposed any woman could work her cruel will upon me like this."

"It is not a cruel will," she said; "don't misunderstand me. I think I am not quite adjusted to the men of my own race yet. You are so different. No Continental man thinks his pride hurt to bend to the caprice of a woman."

"Nina Varesca,"—he turned upon her almost sternly, his arms folded, "what is it that you want of me?"

"For the moment? Your society."

"I want a real answer."

"Your friendship."

"Ah—you know you have that." His breath came hard, she heard it and an inner trembling began to seize her. He turned and took her hands. She felt the strong beat of his pulses. "You can do anything, except play with me. I shall not permit you to do that. You can have all of me. You have all of me. So far as I am

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concerned, you are the only woman in the world. I don't think you want me to make love to you —"

"No, no," she murmured, and made an instinctive movement to free herself. For a moment his hands closed more tightly upon hers, then he released her.

"I thought not. You followed some caprice to-night. I don't understand, but I do not misunderstand. But I tell you frankly I cannot stand this — this — alone with you without losing my head. I am a man. I can't live on the heights where you first came to me. If you asked me here to-night to play upon me you can do it, to gratify your utmost vanity. I would throw away everything,— work, career, life itself to have you one moment in my arms." He stopped, pressing his hands against his eyes. He went on unsteadily. "But you mustn't — you don't know what it does to me — you don't love me — you love your husband; and I — want to love you perfectly without any hurting memory. If you are the woman I think you are, tell me you don't want to play with me like this."

"No, no, I don't, I don't," she cried under her breath. "But don't care like that, don't let it hurt you. I am not worth it. I am just a creature of the surfaces of life — I am not like you."

"You mustn't say such things about yourself. They are not true — I can't let you say them —"

The cab turned a swift corner and drew up before the side entrance of the hotel. Another car ahead of theirs

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had halted to discharge its occupants. The glimpse of his face as they came within the radius of the lights startled her. He spoke again as their machine started forward and stopped with precision.

"You will send for me at any time . . . anywhere if there is ever anything I can do. Otherwise — you will help me to have no regrets."

The hotel attendant opened the cab door with a flourish. She stepped out into the circle of light conscious of Griscom's guiding hand.

He was gone yet still with her, his strong hand gripping hers. She was trembling as if in some paroxysm of fear. What a sense he gave of power,— of power to do, power to resist, to move mountains . . . yet he had been broken like weaker men at her nearness. She covered her face with her hands. Why did this man's restraint make her tremble, shake the very depths of her being as Mario's most passionate protestations had never stirred her? She had not known what the love of a real man was like. . . . She had not known that it was like this. He could love like that and leave her — because he loved her.

Men like Mario. . . . No, no, she would not suffer that thought.

Companionship, such as Jane Worthing had spoken of, life on equal terms with a man like that,— a grown man, not a child to be managed, soothed, controlled — com-

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panionship added to this other madness of loving. . . . She must not think such thoughts, she must not, she must not.

What was it Mario had said only a few hours ago . . . he had found her trustworthy "so far." Was he, after all, wiser than she? Was he right in his belief that it was only a matter of the right man, the man potent enough to tempt a woman from her sworn allegiance? No, no, a thousand times no. This thing that lay between her and this strong man of her own people, this man who recognized her gods, was not a thing Mario could understand. With Mario, to feel was to act. Of that concrete violation of faith implied in the term infidelity as used by his race, he need have no fear. But one could not control that innermost feeling, that response to something strong and high. . . . She did not wrong Mario. She would not forget that Mario was her husband, the father of her boys.

Alone in the darkness of her room the storm seized and shook her.

CHAPTER XX

Mario had not come home. She found a brief note from him on her dressing-table. "I have gone to Atlantic City with Rizzi. Will wire you when to expect me. M."

Rizzi was a young attaché of adventurous tastes. Nina did not approve of him, but after all, could she blame Mario for seeking out a friend of his own people?

What a spoiled child he was! She had always managed him very much as she did her youngest boy. His quick alternations of mood, his direct reactions were those of an undisciplined child with the difference that they were the emotions and passions of maturity.

It was always emotion that prompted Mario to action. If he made some sacrifice of his pleasure it was, "I do it because I love you." Such was the only reasoning he understood. That one could do a distasteful thing from duty, from the abstract sense of right or justice, remained a mystery to him. To meet this phenomenon in his wife sometimes amused, sometimes annoyed him. To comprehend its potency as a motive was impossible to him.

Mario was a faun, irresponsible and pleasure-loving, yet had he been questioned concerning them, he would

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have reckoned his volcanic explosions as indicative of the greatest emotional depths.

She had always acted upon this theory of his irresponsibility, but she seemed only to have consciously admitted it since her return to America. In her superficial contacts with American men on the Continent, their manners had seemed abrupt to her in comparison with the exquisite finish of the Latin. And when she had met Griscom that summer in Switzerland, his reserve, his unobtrusive chivalry, his code as she had divined it in their brief intercourse, had seemed to set him apart from other men. That he was a man who stood out among his fellows she felt even more keenly now that she had seen him in his own setting; yet that his standards were those of his people who were also hers, she had now come to realize completely, and beside them Mario's selfish unreasoned theories, his easy formulas concerning life and women, his uncertain emotional opinions seemed trivial and childish. She had a sudden vision of Griscom's face as she had seen it in the revealing flash of light. . . . Yet underneath his emotion she had been conscious of something infinitely controlled. He had the power to dominate others, yet he would never use that power wrongfully. A man who had faced wars without a thought of personal danger, if only in the capacity of their historian; a man who could save lives as he had saved her child, as he had saved others, with the swift unswerving impulse of the hero. . . .

She rang for Assunta, and sat down in her dressing-

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room to wait for her. His words had said so little in those Alpine days, two years ago. She had not been obliged to make admissions to herself. She knew that his feeling was not what is known as platonic. She was too widely experienced in the knowledge of men not to have understood that, but he had not forced her to recognize it. An Italian man in his situation would have frankly made love to her. There would have been nothing for her to resent in this, according to the code of her husband's country, it would, within its proscribed bounds, have remained a compliment, a tribute to her charms. But young as she had been when transplanted to Italy, she had retained much of the essential viewpoint of her own country, and while she had not repelled, she had never responded to the picturesque Italian love-making.

Assunta entered and set silently about her nightly tasks.

And after all the Italian men who had made love to her she had found on the whole less interesting than her own husband. Mario, in spite of his accepted racial conception of woman as a being unable to protect herself against the wiles of man, and in spite of his occasional outbursts of jealousy, had, with that sensitive perception which the Italian men often possess, realized to some extent her differences, and had, in consequence, brought forth prophecies of disaster from his friends because of the freedom which he had allowed his American wife. That she had been left alone at a Swiss hotel with Paolo was because of one of those moods of confidence — augmented by his temporarily vivid interest in Luisa Castiglione.

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From her pillows she watched Assunta softly moving about. The girl paused with her hand upon the electric button.

"Does the Contessa need anything?" she asked her customary question, yet suddenly in that moment Nina saw the maid's pleasant familiar face as that of an alien.

"*Niente*," she told her, and to Assunta's nightly salutation responded, "*Buon riposa*."

But it was daylight before she fell asleep and when she wakened it was almost noon. In response to her ring Assunta appeared with her smiling morning greeting and a florist's box. They were from Griscom — she knew that before she saw the card — a sheaf of sweet-peas of all colors, smelling like her grandmother's garden, the garden of that old home on the Hudson, where she and Mildred had spent the summers of their childhood. Mario would have sent her gardenias or fragrant roses. She looked up to see Assunta's radiant smile, her sympathetic enthusiasm, and she felt a sudden little pang of reproach. She loved them, she had reason to love them, these sunny childlike people of Italy. How devoted the girl was to her, how gladly, without an apparent compunction she had left her country to come with her!

"There are others also," said Assunta, and brought in a box of dark red carnations with a blank card inside, upon which was written, "For La belle dame sans Merci." Percy Loring! She handed the box to Assunta.

"You may have these, Assunta. I have so many. When one has too much, one does not appreciate."

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The girl accepted them with an exuberant grace of gratitude, and put them aside until she should be dismissed, with the reflection, "They are from the old man who does not please her. If he should know who wears them! *Mio Dio!*"

It was April, and the air had a hint of Spring. The fresh breeze from the open window blew the scent of the sweet-peas toward her. Her thoughts wandered as she played with her rolls and coffee. What if she had stayed in America, married an American husband, had American children who would have played as she had in an American garden full of box and sweet-peas, about a weather-stained sun-dial. . . .

The door opened, and Paolo ran in, asking permission to enter as he came. She held him close in a remorseful impulse of affection.

"I am not a good mother," she said. "We will spend to-day together. We will go in the park to see the animals."

"I see them every day with Assunta," Paolo replied, then his Italian tactfulness caused him to add: "but, it will be different with you, mother dearest." The next moment he remembered dolefully, "But I go to the dentist to-day. I have a loose tooth — see." He exhibited the phenomenon proudly.

"I remember. When you come back then. We will have the afternoon together."

Paolo ran off at Assunta's bidding, and dismissing the maid, Nina made her own toilet. Strains from *Bohème*

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ran through her head. The cool scent of Griscom's flowers filled the room. She tried to dwell upon the picture of that dear garden. The place was sold now. Summer homes on the Hudson were not in demand any more. She wished she might see it before she went back to Italy. She and Mildred might go there together. With the sense of the old childish affection in her mind she went to the telephone and, calling up Mildred, invited her to lunch. Mildred responded with an invitation to lunch at her house instead.

"Percy doesn't like me to be seen too often dining at hotels and restaurants," she explained. "But if you care to come here and bring your knitting, we might have time for a little chat after lunch—" Mildred's voice trailed off doubtfully. "It is the last Bagby morning and I shan't get back till lunch time—"

"I am afraid I haven't any knitting, I am such a useless person." Nina occultly sensed disapproval at the other end of the connecting wire—"but I would love to see you. We never eat in the hotel restaurant, you know; I loathe it."

Mildred reiterated, "You had better come here. But you will forgive me if I have to leave you soon after lunch, won't you? I have such a busy day before me."

Familiar with Mildred's innate innocent tactlessness Nina would have thought nothing of the form of this remark, but her tone was unmistakably chilly.

"Perhaps we had better wait until some less crowded hour. You are such a popular lady," Nina responded.

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"Will you call me up some day when you have more time?"

She called up Jane Worthing, but Central reported that 2671 did not answer. She tried to get Bertha Rennels, but after a long wait, during which "Central" disconnected several times and had to be resummoned, the landlady reported that Miss Rennels was out. She put up the receiver and decided to take a walk in the park. She remembered that in Italy the flowers were out. In another month she would be there again. She walked more quickly at that thought. Something about her caught the staring attention of the idlers on the benches. As she looked about the park — planned in the days of America for the Americans — its once familiar aspect of Northern Spring struck her with the pang of childish memories. The grass showed a faint tinge of green, the pine needles and the clusters of grayish privet marked a darker note. The leafless bushes and trees were vibrant spots of dull gold with violet shadows, holding sharper lights where the sun struck them. At the horizon the Spring mist was a blur of gray blue, while the lake, glimpsed through the trees, and the splashes of light on the stripped branches of the sycamore made sharper accents of blue.

In a sunny by-path she found an unoccupied seat and sat down upon it; but in a few moments she was joined by a dilapidated person of an unhealthy blondness, who addressed her with ingratiating smiles in English indistinguishably clouded with accent. She rose and walked

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reconciled her. A man stared at her with a heavy persistence in the fashionable restaurant to which she took Paolo at tea-time to hear a Russian orchestra. The waiter brought her cold tea much too strong, which she was obliged to send back, but clung oppressively and restlessly about the table in company with other equally aimless attendants, annoying her by constantly moving about and passing the simple elements of their repast, all of which lay directly at hand. The delicious string music barred off by this uneasy human barrier failed of its spell.

"It isn't necessary to keep passing the toast," she told the waiter at last, "and please do not walk about my table all the time. I will summon you when I want my bill. Serve me correctly, as you would in your own country," she added.

The waiter, who was a German, stared at her a moment in astonishment, then with some recognition of a difference, or perhaps merely some unconscious lapse into his old world habit of discreet serving, withdrew at once with some murmured apology.

It was a gay, luxurious scene, but of the people about her,—opulently pretty women in beautiful gowns, men who breathed prosperity and affairs, few of them were people of the class in which she had been born; few of them were, in the special sense, Americans. A generation at most removed them from their simple origins in the old world.

And of the men whose physiognomy proclaimed the native Anglo-Saxon American, the majority were stocky

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in build and bore the unmistakable undistinguished hallmark of homespun antecedents. But these men did not stare at women.

It was really not comfortable for an unattended woman in New York hotels and restaurants, Nina decided. The underlying point of view was Continental; but the manners, loudly proclaiming the interpretations so carefully masked in Europe, were those of the lawless hybrid who recognizes no standard of conduct. Accustomed as she was to the trained mask, the perfect personal service of her own servants, the uncouth behavior of New York hotel and restaurant servants who, in their frank speculations, veiled neither facial expression nor voice, offended her inexpressibly. The mask was all she demanded, but the mask, — of decency, breeding, of civilization, in short — was the one thing that this class of metropolitan on-lookers and servers ignorantly lacked or had ruthlessly discarded.

Yet, could one blame public servants if they became demoralized, serving such people — newly prosperous men who joked with them as with a friend, young girls, the daughters of successful emigrants who cast coquettish glances with the proffered tip? A dark-eyed young woman in priceless furs enjoying a cozy chat with the waiter at the next table had furnished the astonished countess an example of that phase of social illogic.

At another table a florid man of the Maddox type, less subdued by quiet associations, beckoned the waiter to request an air from *Tales of Hoffman* which — so he con-

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fided to the waiter — was a favorite of his companion's. The waiter returned to report the orchestra leader's refusal. "Impossible, eh! How's that? They play it every day here." The Westerner's aggressive tones penetrated to the surrounding tables. Then he smiled broadly and nodded, "*I* get his game —" He pulled out a two-dollar bill and handed it to the waiter. "Give him *that* and I guess he'll find it possible." The Westerner then beamed on his neighbors with the joyful consciousness of facile expenditure; lighted a cigar and leaned back, listening beatifically to the *Barcarolle* which the orchestra obediently began to play — until another waiter dispatched from some authoritative source, reminded him that smoking was not permitted in that dining-room, when resentful gloom again obscured the geniality of his features.

"But that is all wrong," Nina heard his companion say. "It is a sort of hold-up now, isn't it? They are paid to entertain the public not to create a little corner in music. It isn't ethical."

"My dear girl, that's New York," her companion expounded. "There isn't anything ethical in the whole outfit. It is just a gay, old, all-around hold-up. Why, these fellows that wait in these places here make so much that they pay to get the jobs instead of drawing wages."

The girl was right, Nina Varesca reflected. She had only thought of it as stupid and vulgar. But it was not ethical. New York represented social and sociological chaos. An illogical, extravagant, up-side-down scheme

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of society, a thing of false values, of inverted conditions in which these men about her — men who combined childish grasp and judgment with mature sophistications of sex were the moving forces. Mushroom developments of the land of opportunity, they had made their hybrid world here on the ground of freedom, a world created by mental children playing an irrational game of chance in art and affairs; while the native, outnumbered and supine, let the lawless game go on. For it was indeed, as the Westerner in the childish inconsequence of his amusement had said, "a game," a fox and goose game of chasing householders from their homes ever further and further up the island of Manhattan, of depopulating whole districts in the passionate short-sighted pursuit of trade; a game in which waiters make more than University professors, and breakers of stone more than librarians and teachers of children; in which the majority of business houses, newspapers and theatres — and to a rapidly increasing extent, the magistrate's courts — are manipulated by men of foreign birth or parentage, men alien even to the language of the country,— this was New York. And as the town is the epitome and prophecy of the country, this was what America was becoming.

The details, Nina Varesca as a transplanted American, was imperfectly aware of. The psychic essence of it, the sadly changed spirit of the place, she felt as a sensitive woman may, and its effect upon her was profoundly depressing. That America had lost the American spirit, that America was becoming, if it was not already, but the

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rudely violated home of Americans instead of the free, clean country of their birth, was what one felt the moment one moved out of the comfortable shelter of the individual home into the public place.

Was it too late to rescue that trampled standard? Griscom's words returned to her — "Something to be saved for humanity —" If anything *could* save America, a man like Dan Griscom would be the one to show the way.

As she entered the elevator she was aware of significant nods and glances passing between the boys. No doubt they were always better instructed as to Mario's whereabouts than she. Without doubt they all knew what she had just discovered by chance. But it was not that fact that she minded so much as being forced to read the grinning consciousness of it in their unguarded faces.

Nina had dinner alone in her room. She had no engagement for the evening. Tired by the day's frustrated attempts to enjoy some simple pleasures, she was mentally restless. She took up a book that lay upon the table, a new French book with uncut leaves, but laid it down again. Mario was enjoying himself with other women. Why shouldn't she —. It was not late, only half past eight. Why shouldn't she call up Griscom?

There should be no love-making — she could trust herself, she could trust him. Hadn't she the right to the interest of a man's companionship when Mario — no, there was no argument for her there. She had threshed that out long ago. She put the thought from her and bent her

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eyes upon her book, but after a moment she realized that she had not taken in a word. She rose, went to the telephone and gave Griscom's number. In a moment she had the boy at the switch-board of the bachelor apartment house where he lived. Mr. Griscom was out, the boy informed her, but had left word that he would be back at eight-thirty. What name? Any message? She gave a negative reply and hung up the receiver, and found that her hand was shaking. She could send a messenger with a note to be left at his hotel when he came in. . . .

She sat down and wrote: "If you have nothing else to do, won't you drop in for a little while this evening? Mario has deserted me temporarily. I am awfully bored with myself —" She broke off there. What was she doing, after last night, after his last words, "You will help me to have no regrets." What had come over her? Did she after all, want to break down his self-control as he had said she could? Did she in her heart want him to make love to her? And she thought of herself as a disciplined, controlled human being. She was no better than an impulsive girl. Of what avail was the wisdom of experience?

She rose, tore the note in two and threw it into the scrap-basket, paced the room restlessly a few minutes, then passed into her bedroom where Assunta sat putting ribbons in her lingerie. At that moment the bell of the apartment rang. Assunta rose to answer it. The next moment she appeared at the door of the bedroom wearing the air of a conspirator.

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"The Signor Loring," the girl told her in the low voice of intrigue. "At the door. *Si*, here at the very door of the apartment. What could I do but admit him? He said the Signora would see him, but she has given me no instructions —"

"Tell him the Signora presents her compliments but that she is very tired and cannot see him," Nina replied quickly. "And, Assunta, ask him if he will be so kind as to take back the book he lent me. It is on the table, a red book. He asked me to return it promptly. Speak to him in French."

Assunta showed her white teeth. "*Si, contessa*, but the signor does not really understand French."

"Make him understand,"— Nina dismissed the matter,—"the best way you can."

A moment later she heard the door close upon Percy Loring. Going into the outer room for a book she noticed the torn pieces of her letter to Griscom lying on her desk. She thought she had thrown them away. Gathering them up she tore them a second time and threw them into her scrap-basket. That madness was ended.

"I wonder how he got up without being announced?" She spoke unconsciously in English.

But Assunta understood, and proud of her painfully-acquired English, answered in the same tongue. "He give the boys money. He try to giva me money but I don't take it."

"You are a good girl, Assunta." Nina spoke now in Italian. "When you marry, I shall give you money."

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The girl broke into effusive expressions of gratitude. Nina looked at her. She was a pretty girl with large eyes and thick hair and all the brave gaiety of Italy. "Have you never loved, Assunta?" she asked her.

"*Si, Signora*, I have loved, but I had not enough money. He married Domenica, the daughter of the padrone who was rich."

"Were you not then unhappy?" Nina looked curiously at the contented face.

"*Si, si, Signora*. For three days and nights I wept. *Ma! Perche?* It does not help. Gieuseppe is not the only man in the world. One must resign one's self."

Nina smiled. *Sempre, sempre*, the reasoning of Italy! If she had refused Mario he, no doubt, would also have "resigned himself," although at the time he had convinced her that self-destruction was the only endurable alternative. And Griscom? Would he now comfortably accept the inevitable? Or was he also in this respect different? What was it Jane Worthing had said — that with men of his type love was not an episode. Ah, but that was when destiny permitted their lives to be interwoven in that complete union which was the only real marriage.

CHAPTER XXI

Mario returned the next morning, the day, as it happened, of Fair Randolph's wedding. Nina inquired at lunch if he were going and he had replied that he was not. He sat watching her as she arranged her hat before the mirror, enjoying the light grace and precision of her movements. He asked her after a silence which she had not attempted to break, if she had amused herself in his absence, and she replied that the opera was beautiful, despite a Mimi distinctly *mediocre*, and that it was rather a pity he had missed it. As she turned from the mirror her glance swept him lightly.

"And you — were amused also?"

His eye glanced off. "Sufficiently; as one might expect in your unhuman country."

She paused at the door. "It is not very important, but I almost wish you would make it Atlantic City next time, Mario. Perhaps I am becoming more American — but New York is rather small. . . . Will you be home for dinner?"

"*Si, si, buon divertimento,*" he responded. He looked after her with gleaming eyes. "*Gelosia!*" He twirled the corners of his moustache upward. *Bene!* He might have known it. How could those stiff silent ungraceful

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men of America hope to compete with an Italian where a woman was concerned — especially one so well favored as Mario Varesca! He smilingly regarded himself in the glass a moment, took up his hat and went out softly singing.

At the church a very young usher deposited Nina in a pew on the center aisle. A chalice of Easter lilies rose above her head, similar ones were placed at intervals along the aisle. The air was heavy with their fragrance. She heard the woman behind her remark that the Randolphs never paid for *those*. The organ played softly the Grail music from *Parsifal*, passing into fragments of *Lohengrin*. On her other side she caught speculative fragments — “One of the mysteries, my dear — how people like the Randolphs stay in society without any money to do it on —” At that moment Mrs. Randolph, Fair’s still handsome mother, was led up the aisle, agreeably conscious of the eyes upon her, and after her Fair’s young Virginia cousins, a flutter of rippling ribbons and curls.

Nina caught sight of Mildred, rapt and solemn, wearing what Nina used to call her “church face.” Nina divined that she was reliving the ecstatic hour of her own wedding. Percy beside her seemed also gravely aware of a portentous moment. She wondered if Griscom were there and glanced about without finding him. Fragments of memories of her own wedding returned to her, — a triple wedding that in its repetitions had somehow lost the fugitive fragrance of the supreme moment. The English church in Paris; the *mairie*; the ceremony in the Made-

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I suppose it is the sense of finality, of something irretrievably cut off."

As she started to answer she found herself addressed by Percy Loring, and lent for the first time a willing ear to his ponderous compliments. It was not easy to talk to Griscom to-day.

Outside the door she caught a glimpse of Bertha Rennels, small, inconspicuous, as always. The usher, who did not know her, had placed her on a side aisle at the back. Nina leaned forward, extending a cordial hand. "Wasn't Fair beautiful?" she said.

"I suppose so," the girl answered with her whimsical smile. "I couldn't see anything but a corner of an orange blossom."

Near Bertha Rennels at the entrance stood a young man eagerly watching the exit of the wedding guests. He had a trivial face, soft like a girl's with a short chin and a nose slightly upturned. His name was Eldredge Winter. He had an editorial position on a magazine that devoted a number of pages to pictures of people prominent socially and in the professions.

He was an eager climber, but being unable to discover the more obscure labels, judged women by their clothes and the frequency with which their names were associated with large entertainments. Lacking these reliable signposts he graded them as people who rode in street cars, taxis or owned their motors. For that reason he not infrequently missed opportunities, and thereafter detested the embodiment of the advantage he had been unable to

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detect. He knew however who the Countess Varesca was, and looked quickly about to see whom she had addressed, to remain staring in frank surprise when he recognized Bertha Rennels whom he knew slightly in her professional capacity.

"Hello, you here? What paper are you reporting for?" he had said in familiar, careless greeting the moment before, to which Bertha had replied,

"Oh, I am only one of the guests. I am not a journalist, you know."

His speculative eyes had considered her at that with an undertone of envy. He *was* there to report the event. The beautiful Miss Randolph was notoriously kind to solicitors of photographs for Sunday supplement and illustrated magazines. He finally decided on a blunt lightness.

"How did you get here then?"

She flushed, but helpless for the moment against his underbredness — for they were wedged side by side in the crowd, and his round, insistent eyes were upon her — she answered coldly, "I have always known Miss Randolph."

He stared a moment longer, doubting her statement. Her sensitive face, her unmistakable air of breeding, said nothing to him. For Winter was one of those to whom the vulgarian in a motor would have seemed a grande dame and the lady in her garden hat would have been mistaken for the servant.

"I tried to get you on the telephone yesterday," he

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heard the altogether desirable countess saying to Bertha, "I wanted somebody interesting to talk to. I tried twice."

While they were arranging a time for meeting, the Crestons, who had persuaded Nina to dismiss her cab and go with them to the reception, discovered their motor approaching the awning and rather abruptly carried her away.

The speculation and envy in Winter's face gave place to eagerness. "Oh, do you really know her *well*? Won't you present me? Please do. I am crazy to meet her. Are you going to the wedding reception? Perhaps you can work me in?"

He felt no awe of Bertha despite her newly-discovered aristocratic associations. He knew that she earned her living and lived in a boarding-house.

"I am not going to the house," Bertha replied, and his face fell. Doubt returned to his mind. Evidently she did not know these people as well as she pretended to, or she would have been asked to the house. A girl in Bertha Rennels' position would jump at a chance like that . . . Bertha, however, now stood revealed as a person worthy of some attention. He returned to his persuasive manner.

"But you *will* introduce me some time when you get a chance, won't you?"

But Bertha had found an opportunity to escape, and Eldredge Winter was left staring, his mouth a trifle ajar. How was one going to tell anyway with a little mouse like

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that who didn't wear her hair like other people? His processes were not remote from those of Mildred's Delia. Both were navigators without a compass in an uncharted sea.

In Creston's motor, which maintained its smooth velvety motion despite the crowded condition of the streets, they were subjected to no violences of modulation.

"Your man is almost the only New York chauffeur with whom I feel utterly safe," Nina remarked. "I would trust him on the Stelvio pass at night."

"Yes, Jennings is a good man," remarked Creston, "he is a real Yankee, you know. I think he is one of the few New York chauffeurs who does not indulge in the vice of joy-riding. Therefore, our car has remained intact. Joy-riding, as it is known in the vernacular, is the cause of most motor accidents in New York, you know."

As he spoke the machine was obliged to halt for a passing procession that stretched as far as eye could reach down the Avenue,—men of that undersized type that is long bodied and short of leg, all wearing soft hats too large or too small for their heads, marching beside women more vigorous and stocky of build. All were carrying red flags bearing the initials I. W. W. and beside it another, the Stars and Stripes.

"Some foreign association, I suppose," Nina commented, then caught sight of an Irish policeman saluting, "but no, there is our flag."

Creston smiled. "Some foreign association! That is

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a very exact label for the I. W. W., although perhaps a handful of them were born here. It is a so-called socialistic association, in reality a sort of organized commercial brigandry, full of hate for the country that gives them a chance to save more a month than they could earn in a year in their own countries." He considered a very dark, very short, very wide standard bearer unsympathetically and shook his head. "We are accustomed to see the flag of our fathers vulgarized to cheap uses, but it is a step beyond to see it made a cloak for the doubtful activities of greedy, alien marauders."

Nina Varesca's glance traveled over the sea of faces with growing dismay. "To think that these people are the parents of future citizens! Why, there ought to be a pied piper to call them away!"

"Yes; but it is their children who are our real problem. They are the Frankensteins of our brave old democracy," said Creston.

"You don't notice it so much in Boston," remarked Mrs. Creston in her placid voice, "except on Washington Street where one doesn't need to go. That lawless second generation that Charles speaks of doesn't run riot in Massachusetts as it does here. They seem to be more held in check by native habits and unconsciously to have conformed more, being in the minority."

The blockade was lifted, and the car passed on. Nina gave a last glance at the uninspiring faces of the marching belligerents,—scowling some of them, jubilant others—especially a shapeless, dark person with difficulty keep-

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ing his seat upon a horse — the majority merely indeterminate and weak.

"I suppose they *have* been terribly oppressed in their own countries, but why have they so little gratitude here, where they are so much better off?"

"That is the reason," said Creston seriously. "All swift transitions are trying even to the civilized human being. How can we expect undeveloped people in the greedy, self-preservative stage to stand up against it? 'In the day of our prosperity, good Lord deliver us!'"

As the motor turned a sharp corner the face of a woman standing at a cross walk flashed into sudden relief under her black hat, the quiet, strong face of the woman whom life has scarred but not conquered.

"Oh, Janie!" Nina exclaimed, but before Jane Worthing could have seen her the car was half way down the block.

What a contrast Jane's life and Fair Randolph's! It struck her sharply at that moment. Love without marriage for one, and the price a mortgage on all the gifts of the future. For the other, marriage without love and all the shelter that material luxury and the marriage bond can give to that unthinkable barter. If Jane could live her life over again would she take refuge in concealment? Nina wondered. Had the price of self truth been revealed to her as something greater than woman should bear?

She realized that the motor had stopped at the door of the distant relative who was giving Fair's wedding reception.

CHAPTER XXII

Maud Wilmot with her soft, persistent urgency had extracted Nina's promise to come to her last afternoon. She was to have "interesting guests," she communicated the fact with her radiant effect of mystery, one of them an Italian. "You *will* come and bring the count," Mrs. Wilmot was insistent. "One must secure interesting people to meet interesting people." Maud Wilmot, as Mrs. Montague Smith had said, certainly did "secure" one — at least once.

Mario escorted his wife to the cab. As he stood upon the pavement lingering over his gaieties of parting, a young girl passed and glanced at them from under the brim of her wide hat. It was tilted downward at an angle so acute that her chin pointed skyward in the effort to see. It was Nina who recognized Lois Borg. Mario, his attention concentrated upon his wife, did not notice her until she had passed, then only with the flash of reminiscent amusement.

Così! How characteristic of Mario! It was difficult to part with his Ninina, he said, but no, not to Mrs. Wilmot's to-day. Had he not dined there last week to sit between a social reformer with glasses and a girl with too

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many teeth who could talk nothing but horse? *No, gratia, un'altra volta!* So Nina went alone — a fact which she found immediate reason to be grateful for.

For pausing upon the outskirts of the high-voiced crowd in Mrs. Wilmot's spacious drawing-room she found herself beside Creston who had also been "secured," and chanced to ask, "Who is the Italian celebrity we are to meet to-day?" And Creston scanning the crowd — even at first glance a motley one — replied, "A young woman from the opera, I believe; one of the more recent acquisitions,— Luisa Castiglione."

It would have been awkward indeed if Mario had been with her! — a social emergency for which he would have been totally unprepared. In Italy she would never have met in society an opera singer who was her husband's amour, because in Italy opera singers did not have access to drawing-rooms, except as paid performers. But, on the other hand, Nina reflected, she might perfectly well have found her nearest friend occupying the same position. And so, she reasoned with her American impersonalism after the first shock — what was the real difference?

"And is that an artistic celebrity too?" The countess indicated a dark woman with high shoulders and a feverishly animated manner, talking to an attentive group of women.

"That, I believe, is Sonia Orloff, the new Russian actress."

"Russian, you say?" Nina studied the dark face a

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moment, "From Moscow or St. Petersburg, do you know?"

A quizzical smile flickered over Creston's face. "From Hester Street, I fancy. But given the accent and the dark alien appearance Russia makes a plausible and more interesting background." He glanced about the rooms. "Mrs. Wilmot is fond of the folk of the foot-lights, especially the foreign ones. There is a little German actress here also this afternoon, a protégé of hers!"

Nina, glancing about the room, caught for an instant Mildred's eyes upon her. The glance was cold, almost hostile, the smile of recognition perfunctory and chilly. Mildred's face knew no concealments, her disapprovals and endorsements no mask. Nina returned the reluctant greeting with her usual affectionate response, her face revealing no consciousness of the fact that came disturbingly home to her. Percy, without doubt, had convinced his wife that she had tried to involve him in a flirtation. Mildred had had to choose whom to believe. Of course she had accepted her husband's version.

As Nina entered to greet her hostess — a move that carried her in her cousin's direction — she saw that Mildred almost precipitately withdrew, with the obvious intention of avoiding her. Later when she looked for her she could not find her. Evidently her arrival had been the signal for Mildred's departure.

She found Mrs. Wilmot talking French with the portrait painter, a sallow bearded man not in possession of

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the English tongue in spite of ten years' residence in the country.

Greeting the countess with her luminous indiscriminate enthusiasm, Mrs. Wilmot gladly left the painter in her hands, an act fortunately not involving embarrassment to either of her guests. Few of Mrs. Wilmot's "finds" were as authentic as M. Renier. The patron of the arts now focussed all her attention upon Lloyd Creston, sketching in vivid colors the talents of a young Southern writer to the publisher who might supposedly be influenced to patronize the budding genius. Mrs. Wilmot had all the instincts and some of the gifts of the successful impresario.

Mrs. Montague Smith joined the countess and M. Renier and was soon embarked upon a discussion of the futurist movement with the artist. Nina, catching sight of Bertha Rennels in a corner, left the other two to speak to her. But she had hardly greeted her when Eldredge Winter, who had succeeded in obtaining cards from the accessible Maud Wilmot discovered them. He had been a prey to conflicting feelings about Bertha Rennels since their meeting at the wedding. He was not convinced that it was really worth his while to cultivate her, yet on the other hand, he felt that it might be unwise not to establish cheery informal relations with her. But this establishing of relations had not seemed as simple as he had imagined it might be. He found himself puzzled by her replies. He took her literally and missed the intention of her re-

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marks. He was nonplussed at finding her unmoved by his soft automatic flattery, and drifted into patronage only to find himself baulked and deflected by an indescribable something in her face and manner not to be defined in the terms of his world. But he felt no slightest sense of inferiority; he did not feel at a disadvantage with the inconspicuous girl. He only knew that he did not like her. Nevertheless, he hurried up to join her now, his mind focussed upon the introduction he intended to force. He felt convinced of easy success with mousey little Bertha Rennels, and, with the exertion of a little effort he would, he knew, make triumphant conquest of the countess.

He achieved the introduction but it profited him little, save the opportunity of quoting it afterwards, for the countess, reading him at a glance, after her vague bow of acknowledgment, left him with all his carefully prepared compliments unuttered, to join a middle-aged woman on the opposite side of the room.

Winter's soft girl eyes grew hard. Evidently, he reflected, Bertha Rennels did not know these people as she pretended she did. It was clear that an introduction from her carried no weight — else the countess would not have left him for that old woman with flat hair. Besides if she really *had* access to that charmed circle, she would "work" her social connections for "big magazine stories." She could write for Town Topics, she could do lots of things to lift her out of her boarding house. He knew — for he had enquired — that Bertha did none of these things, and if she knew "smart" people as well

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as she says she does, you can be sure she would, decided Eldredge Winter. He gave a contemptuous glance at the contessa's back, reflecting that he hated those affected, slow-moving women, and without the ceremony of an adieu to insignificant Bertha Rennels, he turned sharply in pursuit of the wife of a San Francisco millionaire who had just entered. *She* could buy this Italian countess out anyway — a hundred times over.

The "old woman with flat hair" was Mrs. Parish, a friend of Nina's mother whom she had not seen since her arrival in America.

"Dear Mrs. Parish, I did not expect to find you here," Nina exclaimed.

"No, we antediluvians don't appear so often in the younger circles." Mrs. Parish had the same kindly half ironical smile that Nina remembered. "But Larry Wilmot is one of my favorite boys, you know. I always get in here at least once in a season. His charming wife seems to be interested in all sorts of people and things. But what a pretty creature she is, and so kind!"

Lawrence Wilmot came up in time to rescue Mrs. Parish's small Persian lamb neckpiece from the high heels of the Russian actress. Nina smiled as she saw it. Mrs. Parish had worn one exactly like it in the days of her childhood,—small, tightly-curled, precise. Then suddenly aware that she was in the neighborhood of her hostess and Luisa Castiglione, and that Maud Wilmot was making efforts to catch the eye of her only other Italian-speaking guest, Nina left Mrs. Parish and returned to the

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shelter offered by Bertha Rennels and Mrs. Montague Smith.

"Please tell me about everybody," Nina asked them. "When I recall the picture of Larry Wilmot's imposing mother in these rooms I feel a bit bewildered. Who, for example, is the little blonde with orange curls, wearing a garden hat? Why and what is she?"

Bertha laughed. "A *diseuse*, I believe, who recites *against* music."

"Dear Maud has more enthusiasm than discrimination," Mrs. Montague Smith deprecated. "Really she must go out into the highways and byways to collect them! Look at that black youth with a tousle of hair. Why is he here, Miss Rennels?"

Bertha laughed. "I think I can easily construct him for you. He is a Cooper Union product, possibly born here, who thinks he has a talent for art. He has a pathetic old father on the East Side who slaves in order that his son's gifts may lift him to a high place in the world. The youth, who looks a born fumbler, and is probably infinitely inferior in every way to his father, has turned futurist because he couldn't make a success in the legitimate way. He tells kind Mrs. Wilmot that the authentic writers and painters are academic — and I am afraid she believes him."

"She didn't have people of this sort at her dinner last week," Nina said.

"No, some of us have given her a hint about the boundaries," Mrs. Montague Smith remarked, "but she

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dines them and wines them just the same — only rather more with their own sort of late — which of course they don't like as well."

"But, wasn't this reception given for Mandara?" asked Bertha.

"And who is Mandara?" asked the countess.

At that very moment a young girl in a group next near them with hair theatrically dressed in the style of the fifteenth century, called out in a very loud voice, slightly hoarse and all in the chest register, requesting someone in the other room to "come here."

Bertha's almost imperceptible indication answered the countess' question.

"*That!*" exclaimed Mrs. Montague Smith in horror, "That Maud's marvelous Mandara! But it is a little gamin, all gamin, really this is too much!"

"She is German," Bertha explained, "although her name doesn't suggest it."

"Nor her manners!" exclaimed Nina Varesca. "As far down in the social scale as you can go Germans, unless they are Prussians, have manners — graceful, formal manners."

"Then let us call her a Prussian," suggested Bertha. "That's as bad a name as you can call anyone in these days."

They saw their hostess approach her strong-lunged favorite. "Isn't she an enchanting child?" she appealed, evidently with entire confidence in their agreement, to the three women.

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"A child who ought to be successful selling extras," murmured Mrs. Montague Smith to her companions, while her hostess's ear was temporarily engaged elsewhere.

But Mrs. Wilmot, once more detached, turned beaming upon them with her avian charm. "Have you all met Mlle. Mandara?" Her doting accents plainly proclaimed her belief in the irresistible attractions of the young Mandara and her fear lest someone should, inadvertently, be deprived.

"I haven't," Mrs. Montague Smith replied, "but I really cannot stay another minute, Maud." And Mrs. Montague Smith escaped.

"Don't present me to any more entertaining people, dear Mrs. Wilmot," the countess protested, "for I must go too."

Mrs. Wilmot, on the verge of insisting that the countess surely had time for a few words with the enchanting child, caught sight of Mrs. Parish and taking the puzzled Mandara by the hand led her up to the older woman instead.

"But why poor Mrs. Parish!" exclaimed Nina. "The very antipodes! Did you ever see a funnier contrast!"

"She is thinking," Bertha expounded with her amusement, "that she is bringing a little brightness into Mrs. Parish's dull life. Poor, dear lady, she hardly knows how to cover her bewilderment. Someone ought to rescue her."

As they stood watching the oddly incongruous group,—the gracious older woman, of a type, fine, keen,

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aristocratic, typically American, the dusky, vital young foreigner so plainly, as Mrs. Montague Smith had said, "all gamin," and her uncritical ingenuous patroness, they heard Creston's voice beside them.

"Well, have you met the various celebrities?" There was a quizzical light in the publisher's eye. "I have had a most interesting talk with M. Renier about the facial types of various nations illustrated by the guests of the afternoon."

"Without asking their consent?" asked Bertha Rennels.

Creston laughed. "Oh, conducted with all the French amenities, I assure you. He showed me the long Teutonic head, the low set ear of the Hebrew and the frequent lack of development in the back head of the Frenchman. He finds the greater regularity in the Italian, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon American types."

While Creston was talking, Maddox, a late arrival, joined them, his first welcome for the countess, then Creston, then Bertha Rennels — in order of their importance. This ceremony over, he surveyed the crowd. "Well this is a cosmopolitan gathering! Who can say that New York is not a cosmopolitan city?" He appealed widely as one personally responsible for the city of his recent adoption.

"It is a *conglomerate* city," said Creston. "I don't know about its being cosmopolitan. Doesn't cosmopolitanism rather presuppose a fusing of the cultured elements of the various nations?"

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"Oh, well, we are a conglomeration of nations—" Maddox, missing the meaning of the publisher's distinction, repeated a familiar utterance of our period. "That is what America is."

Creston lightly challenged him. "Are *you* a conglomeration, Maddox? I'm not. If we are a conglomeration of nations, why do we speak English? That remark was put in circulation for the mental easement of our hyphenates."

"Oh, of course I am of pure American stock, too," Maddox hastily established himself, "but you can't deny that the country is a conglomeration."

"It has been invaded by a conglomeration. But the real American is an Anglo-Saxon—you can't get away from that; an Anglo-Saxon with a touch of Dutch or German or French—according to the part of the country he came from—at his remote roots. All nations have a little mixture of blood at their roots. When they do not have it they perish. And I am afraid we are going to prove that, when they have too much of a mixture they also perish. You can graft a little alien blood with advantage. You can't deluge a country with strange people whose racial psychology, habits and standards are totally at variance with its original inhabitants and evolve a good, clean, consistent type. On the contrary you get exactly what we have in America to-day,—an oil and water democracy with a money standard in which to a great extent, the personal and material standards of the least progressive classes in continental Europe are replacing

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the altruistic Anglo-Saxon ideals of our original democracy. We aren't Americanizing them. *They* are de-Americanizing the country. Pardon the raucous scream of the eagle."

"I am afraid you are right," said Nina Varesca.

"As for the hyphen," Creston went on, "I believe in encouraging it as a distinguishing label instead of trying to obliterate it. A man who can forget at once all that his own country has meant to him isn't going to be much good to ours. He is the man — and his name is legion — who takes on citizenship entirely for the material advantages it offers him. American citizens should be born, not made. If a crisis comes and the emigrant's heart is with the country of his birth he should go back."

"A hyphenated American is a person whose parents were born in Europe, isn't it?" asked the countess.

"Correctly speaking — yes. But our newspaper men," he lightly made Maddox responsible, "use the expression — when they use it at all — to describe the naturalized alien. But they implore us not to use it. Everybody is an 'American' with them, whether he can pronounce his nationality or not."

"We aim to please," laughed Maddox.

"There you are!" exclaimed Creston.

"I met a woman on Tenth Street near Broadway the other day who asked me if I could speak English," remarked Bertha Rennels. "When she found I could she seemed overjoyed. She said she had asked four people and that I was the first who had understood what she said."

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and I, the husband, remain at home to receive the presents men send to you!"

She met his excited eyes with her inscrutable quiet. "You remained at home by choice, Mario."

In reply to that unanswerable statement Mario held out a package in a hand that trembled. "You are strangely indifferent to your gift."

She sat down and drew off her gloves. "It is not so strange when you consider that I have recognized the handwriting."

He made an inarticulate exclamation. "Perhaps not!"

She looked up at him. "Why do you not open it if you are so much interested? You do not usually wait for the formality of my permission."

To Mario's essential viewpoint, that last remark contained no thrust. He simply obeyed the suggestion, watching his wife's face the while.

"You do not fear that I may read first some intimate message?"

For answer she laughed. The package unwrapped disclosed a heavy volume. He read the title aloud, "The White Flower," and held it out for her inspection.

"Percy Loring's latest vacuity, I suppose." She rejected it with a gesture, but Mario remained unconvinced. He laid the book upon the table, apostrophizing it with dramatic cynicism:

"Truly America is not Italy! The wife goes out

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alone for her pleasure; the husband remains at home to guard his wife's love tokens."

She looked up to meet the febrile glitter in his eyes and rose slowly, gathering up gloves and card case. "As you say, Mario, America is not Italy. I go to the house of an acquaintance to meet your friend, Luisa Castiglione."

She had scored that time. After staring at her a moment in silence Mario replied with sudden serenity, "Is it so —" and left the room, the opening bars of a song upon his lips.

She had scored that time in their little game of foils and yet — she admitted it to herself freely now — how she despised the game!

CHAPTER XXIII

That evening, seated at a cabaret table with the Montague Smiths, Mario's spirits rose to the heights of his native gaiety. Nina watched his increasing excitement with apprehension. These moods of his were liable to be succeeded by sudden reactions. Percy Loring, the prodigal dispenser of gifts, was temporarily forgotten, but after Percy — what? If Daniel Griscom's name should ever be spoken between them. . . . If Mario's jealousy hitherto unawakened in that direction should seek to force that closed door, how should she ever bear it?

A young girl danced past like a bacchante, her hair loosened, her lips apart. Her low-cut gown and eccentric short skirt had the boldly bizarre effect of a masquerade costume, but it was the latest effort of a fashionable dressmaker. At an adjoining table a man's voice rose in alcoholic confidence. The strong dry scent of chemical perfumes filled the air, succeeding each other in fugitive procession as the crowd passed; young girls still in their teens with rouged cheeks and lips and penciled lashes coquetted with their young partners, sometimes with the grace of young abandon, often with loud self-consciousness.

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Many of them had beauty, but few of them the erect carriage of the American girl; the majority, indeed, were markedly unAmerican in type. While the young men, with their pompadoured hair and small upturned moustaches if not foreign in fact were quite universally so in effect.

Everywhere hurry, movement, the chink of glasses, the popping of corks, the rhythmic beat and shuffle of feet and above and through all the monotonous beat of the music of Broadway,—jarring in its transitions, irritating in its ceaseless repetitions, uninventive, sensual, commonplace, without gaiety or nationality — just the music of Broadway.

Nina became aware of Mrs. Montague Smith's voice on the note of plaintive protest. "It is really appalling how many of the younger set come to these places; not as spectators as we have, but to *dance* as they would at a friend's house."

"Their's is not the age for spectatorship," said Monty Smith.

"I see Julia Smith's daughter this minute dancing like a girl in the varieties," Mrs. Montague Smith righteously turned from the sight. "I wonder that their parents will allow them to come."

"Their *parents*," scoffed Monty Smith, "what have they got to do with it! Poor old obsolete parents! In another generation children will be born without any."

"Monty!" exclaimed his wife, with her dramatic feint of being shocked at Monty.

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They were very nice, the Monty Smiths, Nina reflected, yet it occurred to her that the real reason for her frequent association with them lay in the fact that in Monty Smith's downright friendly admiration of her, Mario found none of the food for jealousy that her most superficial intercourse with the majority of men seemed to excite. Monty Smith and Dan Griscom — oh, irony of love's blindness — these two of all her male acquaintances in New York had entirely escaped his alert possessive suspiciousness. Mario's voice interrupted her reflections. She looked up to meet his illumined glance, radiant like a child's.

"Come, let us dance also! Why not? Mrs. Montague Smith, I beg the honor."

"There, you see," Mrs. Montague Smith laughed, "that is how it works! Thank you, no, Count Varesca, I remember how wonderfully you dance, but to-night I have determined upon the rôle of onlooker."

The count turned to his wife, "Then you, Nina, will favor me—" but his wife refused also. "*Ma, perche?*" he urged in a lower voice. "What difference does it make? This is New York, not Rome or Paris."

Why should she feel almost angry at this long familiar attitude of the European toward her country? Who, after all, was more critical of the thing New York had become, than she was herself? Yet, "You forget, New York is my home," was what she answered him.

In his present mood this reply did not disturb her husband's equilibrium. "Not any more," was his comfortable response, "for I have made you a citizen of Italy."

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It was true legally, as well as practically. Why did she feel that pang at the thought?

An alleged Spanish dancer began to dance at the end of the room. Tendering her that initial attention of the appraising glance to which her sex was entitled from his, Mario quickly looked away again. The woman's face was hard, the body unseductive and mechanical in its exaggerated movement. Nina saw his eyes wandering here and there about the room, now brightening with response to some feminine charm of face or gesture, now cynically amused at his interpretations of some incident flashing past with the swiftness of a cinema. This place, this stale place of excitement, with its tinted lights, its noisy music, its crude artificial gaiety, amused her husband, possessed his interest to the extent of blotting out for the moment the passionate jealousy of a few hours before; while she longed intensely to go home, to escape from the sight and sound of it.

The voice of the confidential man at the next table rose in reminiscent pity, "And yet, by God, Jim, I *loved* that woman —"

She caught a glimpse of his foolish flushed face between the hurrying waiters, the eyes blurred and set, the weight relaxed upon the heavily planted elbows.

At least Mario never drank too much. She had often thanked Heaven that in that respect he had the temperate reserve of the Latin.

The very audible and shocking comment of a waiter upon some woman passing with her escort caught her ear

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and a sudden sense of revulsion against the clang and confusion of it all rose within her . . . against the ceaseless monotonous jerk of the music. She remembered the subtle rhythm, the sombre harmonies of the chants of the Southern negroes as she had heard them years ago in the South, that plaintive voice of a people born in the shadows. Upon that rhythm and cadence, the unconscious expression of the soul of a captive people, this gross hurdy-gurdy of the streets had been based — debased rather into a stupidity of vulgar noise. The graceful sensuousness of the popular Italian melodies was spiritual in comparison. It was like everything else in New York. It was part of the whole thing that the occupying army of the outsider was doing to America.

And yet always this pang, this recoil from the thought of returning to her old life. Upon that picture she could not trust herself to look. Something like panic seized her at the thought.

Well, then, if things had come to that pass she could not go too soon. . . .

Mrs. Montague Smith, noting something singularly unlike the signs of entertainment in the contessa's face, leaned forward and asked her if she was bored.

"No, indeed." Instantly the expression vanished. Mrs. Montague Smith could almost believe she had imagined it. "I was just thinking what a curious development of New York life these places are. It is just as you said — an imitation of the Continental cabaret with-

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out their esprit. There is a heaviness of touch that you don't feel over there."

"It is the difference between bad whiskey and good sparkling wine," observed Mario.

"I am afraid the count does not love New York," remarked Mrs. Montague Smith without reproach.

The count broke into courteous, insincere compliments which his wife laughingly interrupted. "You need not be so untruthfully polite, Mario *mio*. Mrs. Montague Smith comes from Philadelphia and does not take New York seriously to heart and Mr. Monty Smith thinks his native city is going to the dogs anyway, don't you?"

"I think it has already arrived," amended Monty, then added, "but this spectacle not only is not American, it isn't even New York. It is pure Broadway."

"Mario says that New York is a city with all the luxuries and none of the beauties of ancient Rome, in the possession of Barbarian invaders," said Nina.

"But you always assure me that New York is no longer an American city," her husband protested.

"He wants you to understand that he knows all Americans are not alike and that all Americans are not Americans," Nina lightly interpreted. "But he does not like us. That fact remains."

"He liked *one* of us," interposed Monty Smith with meaning.

"I can understand exactly how he feels," Mrs. Montague Smith sympathetically assured the count. "I imagine it is only the humble Italian who betters himself

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so tremendously here that really likes the country. I am no believer in the human-nature-the-same-everywhere theory. It seems to me that the races have each their individual soul, fundamentally alien to each other." Mrs. Montague Smith, pensively considering her thought, did not note an indescribable passing expression in the contessa's eyes. Her answer waived the matter of agreement.

"Yet one may be as utterly alien in soul to another of the same race," she said.

Montague Smith, who had surprisingly followed their comments with interest, answered the countess with an unexpected seriousness. "Yet in times of crisis men of the same race tend to react in the same way, do they not? You know how the Germans fire on the men trying to rescue their wounded, and how the British officers won't permit their men to retaliate in the same way. A racial code that can hold against cowardly barbarism like that is a tremendously strong thing."

"What curious people I see here," remarked Mario, who abhorred philosophizings of any sort. "Where, I ask you, do they come from? That strange little girl who looks like a Mexican squaw, and that young Albino with the enormous round back and hips where her knees ought to be."

Monty Smith kindly expounded. "Why, most of the people that you see in these places are of that curious classless class, peculiar to New York, I fancy, often the children of emigrants on the upward path, people

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whose only idea of social life is in public places,—theatres, restaurants and hotels—that sort of thing. People whose ideal of supreme luxury is a big hotel.”

“They don’t know yet how to achieve it at home. The hotel is their school,” said Mrs. Smith.

“I suppose, too,” Nina reflected, “they have no real basis for social intercourse, many of them, unless it is something physical like dancing. Their chief amusement is to watch and listen to other people.”

Suddenly Mrs. Montague Smith exclaimed and clutched Nina’s arm. “My dear, isn’t that Lois Borg? It is! See, over there with that long, thin, black creature who looks like a beetle. He is probably one of those professional dancers — or worse.”

With a grotesque zig-zag swagger, Lois approached them backwards, passing them without recognition. Her short, wide skirt almost swept Mario’s knees. He regarded the girl’s large ankles with cynical attention.

“She has not the slim aristocratic feet of America, the *orchacina*,” he remarked in a low tone to his wife. “Some good friend should advise her to adopt a kinder fashion of dress — let us say the court train.” Mario revealed not the faintest consciousness of his defection.

“Free life — free love, we love but while we may,” was in effect his creed. His wife watched him with a sort of whimsical despair. The problem had changed, but there was always the problem. The only consolation lay in the fact that it never did remain the same problem long.

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On the way home, Mario was in a cheerful mood with a tendency to musical outbursts. He concluded with an improvised finale to make a remark.

"This week we must ask Mr. Griscom to dinner. Soon we shall be sailing away, without having offered him the slightest courtesy."

"Yes, we will ask him next week," Nina answered from the darkness of the cab. Mario thought her voice had a tired sound.

"No more of this folly of tonight." He drew her possessively into his arms. "Hereafter we amuse ourselves only with that which amuses. But we *must* entertain Mr. Griscom. I am surprised that you, with your American punctiliousness, have not done so already. It is I, the neglectful Italian, who have already twice reminded you!"

His arms tightened about her. How she longed for freedom from that inescapable physical sense of him!

CHAPTER XXIV

About the middle of May a wave of summer weather made the over-crowded city oppressive and Nina sent Paolo to visit an aunt who lived for a part of the year in a fashionable resort about an hour's journey from town. The polo matches and golf tournaments began a few days afterwards and the count and countess went also to spend the week-end with their relatives.

Nina learned through Fair Randolph, returned from her honeymoon and now temporarily lodged in the same hotel, that the bride and bridegroom as well as Percy and Mildred were to be at the club-house for the week-end. She had not seen Mildred for some weeks. Percy had continued to call, although she never received him. Various books had been left at her door until she had accumulated a complete autographed edition of his works.

Nina's uncle and aunt were quiet people, who in spite of their possession of a fairly large fortune owned but one motor and a riding horse. The last day of their visit the machine was found to be in need of some slight repairs, so the count and countess and her uncle were taken to the country club in a friend's car and Paolo, who was passionately addicted to the polo ponies, went with the family physician, who had taken a fancy to the

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child. As they stopped at the club-house entrance Nina caught a glimpse of Mildred and Willard Wright, who was a member of the club, going up the steps with tennis racquets in their hands. Mildred hurried in without recognition of her cousin, although Nina felt sure that she had seen her.

Inside the large general room Mildred selected a corner partly barricaded by a table littered with periodicals. Willard Wright flung himself on the window-seat beside her.

"It seems good to have a game again." Mildred's cheeks were flushed; she looked very girlish. "I have hardly played since I was married. Mr. Loring prefers golf, but somehow I have never been enthusiastic about it."

"It always seems a sort of old gentleman's game, don't it?" said Willard Wright. Then consternation at what he had said appeared upon his frank countenance. "But of course lots of young men play it," he hastily added.

"Let's have some iced tea," suggested Mildred, conscious of no awkwardness.

"That's a bright idea." Willard called a waiter and gave the order.

Just at that moment Percy Loring entered. "Mildred, my dear," he regarded her disordered hair with disfavor. "What a hoyden!"

"Why, I was just thinking how pretty she looked," said Willard Wright in his strong, cheerful voice.

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"I'm afraid I *am* rather wind-blown." Mildred flushed under her husband's glance. Percy Loring caught sight of the arriving tray then.

"*Iced* tea. Mildred! have some regard for your digestion."

"I never have indigestion, dear, and I am so hot," Mildred pleaded.

Mr. and Mrs. Barret Breck came in from the billiard room and Willard Wright hailed them jovially. "Here comes the bride,—tum, tum, te tum. Come over here and have tea with us."

"Thanks, I've just ordered a high-ball," said Breck.

Mildred hurriedly started for the dressing-room. Montague Smith, talking horse in his placid steady voice, paused to greet her as she passed, but she was too disturbed to smile. Her husband overtook her; his eyes were bright, his lips compressed.

"I am surprised indeed to see you making yourself so conspicuous with that young Wright. Please remember that you have the dignity of my name to uphold, Mildred." The youthful effect of the young pair with their tennis racquets had had a painful effect upon Percy Loring.

Almost in tears, yet with something like hauteur in her shocked face, Mildred exclaimed, "Why, Percy!" and turning quickly, walked away from him. Her husband stood looking after her. His face at that moment did not suggest the author of "The Home of The Heart" as he might have been imagined by the idealistic reader.

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He was roused by Fairfax Breck's gay unsubdued voice. "Mr. Loring, come right here and tell me Ah look like an old married woman. Ah've been married three whole weeks an' Ah certainly must look it by now."

Percy turned with a smile somewhat forced. "Being a scrupulously truthful person, Miss Fair, I couldn't say that."

"She isn't *Miss Fair* any more," grumbled Breck.

"You must excuse my old-fashioned habit of speech, Mr. Breck. I have known her as Miss Fair so long."

"Then I shall know where to come for points." Breck's smile was certainly unbecoming.

Percy Loring's attention had wandered in the direction of the door. "An agreeable surprise, the count and the countess," he announced, and hastened to greet them.

"Come, join us," Willard Wright blithely summoned them as they approached. "*We* call it iced tea weather, but maybe it spells cocktails for you."

The countess declined with her smile. "Tea for me, not iced. Varesca can speak for himself."

The count, who wore the pensive air of the social captive, committed himself to vermouth and seltzer.

"He is conservative about American drinks," his wife remarked. Then she glanced at the attendant author. "Where is Mildred?"

"She'll be here directly. She was rather blown after her tennis."

Fair joined her old school friend, who in greeting her

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turned a graceful shoulder upon the author. "Heard the news about Jane Worthing?" Fair inquired.

"No!" Nina looked startled. "I hope nothing has happened to poor Janie —" Somehow it seemed impossible to associate Jane with anything but sad happenings.

"Nothin' except she's goin' to be a war nurse. That seems to be the latest whitewash for ladies with damaged characters!"

"Fair, how can you!"

"A fact, my dear." Fair remained entirely unbuked. "They used to take to suffrage or socialism — somethin' emancipated that justifies their scandalous actions. Now they go to nurse the soldiers."

Nina turned from Fair — her flippancy seemed too cruel — and dropped into a chair by the table. Willard Wright promptly joined her.

"He called Mrs. Loring down pretty hard just now," Willard spoke in an undertone, jerking his head in the direction of Percy Loring. "Called her a hoyden. I thought she looked like a peach. I daresay he didn't mean it the way he sounded."

Nina, amused, glanced at his bland boyish face, his clear unpenetrating eyes. "You are a great admirer of Mr. Loring's, I believe."

"Of his books — well, I should say! I don't know him so awfully well. Why, Mr. Loring has been my favorite author ever since — well —" Willard smiled significantly, "since I read his first yarn."

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"Is he as you imagined him from reading him? Or do only girls have ideals of their favorite authors?" Nina felt a little at a loss as to how to talk to this smiling young man.

"Why, I don't know," Willard considered the matter conscientiously. "No, I don't think he is exactly. Guess I thought he'd be more of a man's man — although his stuff does read like poetry."

"We don't expect men to like sentimental books, but I believe they do — quite as much as women." Nina refused the club-house toast and put down her teacup. She had caught a glimpse of Mildred at the door.

Willard Wright stared. "Do you call Mr. Loring's books sentimental?"

"Well rather, don't you?"

"I guess I don't know just what you mean by that." The boy's eyes rested upon her with a doubtful look. "Do you know I wonder sometimes if you say just what you mean?"

"Are you accusing me of insincerity — or of an imperfect command of my native tongue?" The contessa's manner only increased Willard Wright's bewilderment.

"Now don't mix a fellow up." He gave her a clear glance. "What's that about language being invented for the concealment of thought? But you don't make one mad somehow when you do it. I don't usually take to women that aren't straight out from the shoulder."

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The countess laughed. "I don't believe you get 'mad'."

"Oh, but I do. Sure. Don't make any mistake about that." His roving eyes rested upon the count who with a harassed brow was carrying on a difficult conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Breck and Percy Loring. He noted the Italian's urban coat. Some girl — presumably of the straight out from the shoulder variety — had made Willard alert on the question of masculine attire. "The count isn't playing today. Don't he like golf?"

"He doesn't play. He has been watching the polo; it is a novelty to him." She could not think of Mario in connection with any athletic sport, yet oddly enough she had never realized it before. He had never seemed to her lacking in masculinity, and yet now looking at him she was conscious of his softness of fibre compared with these Northern men of her own country.

Percy portentously approached the seat where they were sitting. "Come, my lad, you have monopolized the contessa long enough. I am bringing her a cup of tea and deserve your seat in return."

"Get another chair," Nina suggested, but Willard Wright rose at once.

"Take mine, sir. There comes Mrs. Loring. She hasn't had her iced tea yet."

Percy took the seat, laughing heartily. "If there is such a thing as being *too* frank! I had not supposed any cavalier would desert you so joyously." For some reason Percy always wanted to convince the woman who

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attracted him that she was not admired by other men — although had such been the case he would not have sought her out.

“But you believe, do you not, that one cannot be too open and truthful — even about the smallest things? I think I have heard you express that sentiment?”

Percy's gentle expression and movement of the head seemed to signify modified acquiescence. “When truth is incompatible with chivalry — one should somehow evade the issue.” He smiled, agreeably conscious of his subtlety, then turned his very personal attention upon her. “I had not hoped for this privilege — you social butterfly — always absent, sipping sweets from other flowers! But you read my books — I have at least that comfort. I know that my mind touches yours. But why, most ungracious and lovely countess, will you not appoint an hour for an interview, as the reporters call it?”

“I wrote Mildred the other day asking her to set a day when you would both dine with us but she has not answered yet.”

Percy Loring sat up, his attention suddenly fixed. “I have heard nothing of it. Is it possible that Mildred is deciding these matters without consulting my —”

Nina rose. Mildred had passed her quickly without recognition. Percy got up also, the muscles of his throat moved as if he swallowed something. “You are not going to desert me,” he said.

“I am going to speak to Mildred.” Nina left him staring after her.

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Mildred had gone out on the verandah. She was alone and seemed embarrassed at her cousin's approach. Nina divined that she would have avoided the meeting if it had been possible.

"Mildred dear, what do you mean by treating me like this? You have never answered my invitation to dinner, you haven't been near me for over two weeks." Nina's tone, although light, was direct.

"I asked Delia to telephone you that we couldn't come. I thought she had done so. I am sorry if you did not get the message," Mildred replied, without meeting her eyes.

"You asked Delia to telephone me!"

But Mildred did not attempt to apologize for the manner of her refusal.

Nina put her hand on her cousin's arm. "What is the matter, dear?" she said.

After a moment Mildred answered her directly, as Nina had thought she would. "I am disappointed in you, Nina."

"Dear child — disappointed! In what way? What have I done?"

"You have proved disloyal — different from everything I had imagined you to be."

She had done Percy no injustice then. The question was how far in misrepresentation and falsehood his self-protection had carried him.

"I don't know what you mean by my disloyalty," Nina said at last.

Mildred turned her large eyes upon her. They were

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cold and unfriendly. "I would rather not talk about it. You, I am sure, must understand."

"Indeed I do not, Milly dear."

Mildred, evidently unmoved by her denial, finally became explicit. "If you insist upon talking about it — I know how you have tried on various pretexts to get Percy to come and see you alone. I suppose you trusted to his not telling me."

For a moment Nina stared at her in a stunned silence. "But, my dear, that is not the case. You have misunderstood something."

"I have misunderstood nothing. Percy showed me a note of yours slipped in a book that you had returned, asking him to tea. He admitted reluctantly — he is so chivalrous — that you had been simply pursuing him with invitations. He asked me never to discuss it with you but you have forced me to do so."

Some golf players returning from a game passed them on their way into the club-house. A woman, noticing Mildred's broken, disturbed face, stared at them curiously.

"I have some recollection of enclosing a card with thanks and a general invitation to come in at tea time — for you both, of course — in a book of Mr. Loring's that I returned." Nina spoke when they were again alone.

"He said that you had made the books an excuse," Mildred quoted. As Nina made no further defense she went on: "Fair Randolph told me that she saw Percy going to call on you. You probably didn't realize that

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living in the same hotel as she does now she could not help seeing things. I spoke to Percy about it, and he said that Fair had exaggerated, but that it wasn't always possible to refuse you and that he had called once or twice when he thought you would be out."

Still Nina Varesca listened in silence. Mildred continued: "And this morning we had a little talk about it—I tell you to save prolonging this unpleasantness—and he told me about a letter of yours that he saw by accident on your desk. Understanding from your maid's message in bad Italian-French that it was intended for him, he read it. It was a letter to some man telling him that you were alone and that your husband was away and begging him to come to see you; and he said—Percy is so delicate about women's pursuit of him—'You see I am not the only one'."

Nina listened, speechless. In some way Percy Loring had seen her letter to Griscom. But how? When? And how strange that honorable little Mildred could see nothing to criticize in Percy's action! Certainly the logic of love was past understanding.

"You don't deny writing that letter, I suppose." Mildred faced her an instant.

"No, I do not deny writing it," said Nina Varesca. "It has a melodramatic sound certainly," she added after a moment's silence. "Yet, if you stop to think, Mildred, there is nothing wildly unconventional in my asking a man to call because I happened to have an empty evening before me. But I don't quite understand what accident

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enabled Mr. Loring to see the letter you speak of as it was destroyed and never sent."

Mildred flushed and her head went up. A look came into her eyes that Nina had never seen in them. "I have told you that it lay on your desk unaddressed on top of a book that you had asked Percy to take home. You sent word by your maid. I daresay she picked it up and handed it to him. In any case he understood that it was for him. It was an awkward accident certainly, for you."

There was a pause in which Nina remembered. The note had been torn in two and thrown into her scrap-basket. It had lain there the evening that Percy Loring had called and been refused admittance. Afterwards she had found it on her desk and wondered about it. This then was the explanation.

"There is nothing in the incident that I feel to be awkward but your misunderstanding of it." Nina spoke at last.

"I am sorry to hear you say that, but it does not surprise me now. I suppose it's your way over there." Mildred's immobile brows contracted. "Fair Randolph says you think nothing of intrigues with your friends' wives and husbands on the continent—"

But Nina interrupted then with a decisiveness new to Mildred. "I shouldn't advise you to accept Fair's versions of life—continental or otherwise. She is, as you must have discovered by now, an irresponsible heartless gossip." She turned to leave. "I am sorry, deeply sorry for all this, Mildred."

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"It has been a terrible thing to me. I thought you something so different."

Mario came out of the club-house alone. The two women, facing the other way, absorbed in their conversation, did not hear him until he was upon them.

"I have tried not to see it — but it has been forced upon me, you have tried in every way to have a flirtation with Percy, and it is not your fault that it has failed." Mildred turned without recognizing Mario and went back into the club-house. Nina turned to face her husband.

CHAPTER XXV

He had heard the last words or perhaps caught the import of the situation with a more subtle sense than hearing.

"Have you then been amusing yourself with your cousin's husband?" he said. "I have been told that you were not lonely in my absence."

Mario's face was white, his eyes a black flame between the narrowed lids. His wife smiled as at a child overwrought with some fancied grievance.

"He called a few times while you were away. I have never received him." Then at his passionate exclamation she took a different tone. "Mario dear, if I were seeking a romantic intrigue wouldn't you give me credit for better taste?"

His eyes searched hers. "I think that you have told me the truth so far — *ma, chi lo sa!*"

"Dear Mario, don't be silly — it is enough to have Mildred misunderstand. Don't add another stupidity to the situation."

That sinister suggestion of a cast came into Mario's eyes. "As you say, I give you credit for better taste. But if it were true, I should kill him — or you."

"Take him, please, Mario. Then Mildred can marry

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some normal young man; the spinsters can find another literary idol. You need me to take care of you and the children. Don't be foolish, *ragazzo*."

"How is it?" He turned upon her, accusing her with the hurt wonder of a child. "You can do this thing to me when you have been my wife eight years."

They were still alone upon the verandah. She laid her hand with a light caress upon his arm. "Do you really love me as much as if you weren't married to me, Mario?"

He met the affectionate mockery in her eyes and put away her hand. "You are much more of a cynic than I am — that is not like a woman."

"It is because I *am* a woman! All women practise cynicism whether they are conscious of it or not, didn't you know that?"

But his tensivity did not relax with her determined lightness. "Why do I love you like this!" It was the resentful protest of the creature of sense that would be happy in the sunshine, against some uncomprehended limitation.

"That is not in your usual happy style."

He stared at her, his face dark and frowning.

"It is not in the way a man usually loves his wife when the period of mystery is past."

She smiled. "And not just a question of property rights —"

He looked down at her, his eyes troubled. She was his, this delicate, fragrant, subtle creature. He could read attraction and desire in other men's eyes, and remind him-

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self that she was his — all his. Why then did she give him this sense of impotence, of being somehow at a disadvantage with her?

"What do you mean by that? Ah—" He knotted his hands together with an exclamation. "In my heart do I really know you — do I know your heart?"

Her eyes remained upon his hands, lithe, nervous, yet strong. "That is a strange thought for an Italian to have about the woman who is his wife."

"You are not an Italian woman."

"Mario, it doesn't suit the Italian temperament to become introspective."

"You treat me as if I were a child—" Suddenly he seized her by the wrist, looking into her eyes as if he would surprise some secret there. "You are my wife, the mother of my children, yet sometimes I look at you — and ask myself if you have ever been mine —"

"Someone will see us." She released herself hastily, then seeing signs she knew in his face, resorted in desperation to the means she despised. "That first June in Venice — have you forgotten?"

"Ah, then — then — yes; but you don't feel like that now."

"Neither do you. One's expression changes."

"But I love you more — more — than then."

"When some nonsense stirs up this primitive man jealousy."

"Ah — I wish you were a little more primitive."

"You wouldn't like me so well, Mario — or so long."

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It seemed as if he could not take his eyes from her face. "You are too clever for a woman. You do not need that also. It is too much power."

She laughed and shook her head. "Too clever for a woman! That sentiment is out of date here."

"But your life is not to be lived in America."

Again that pang at the thought. She turned away. He caught her arm. "Look at me."

"Mario, don't be melodramatic — or if you must be, not here."

"Look me in the eyes and tell me — if you can — that no other man is more to you at this minute than I am!"

He noted without understanding it her flitting smile. "Mario, can you look me in the eyes and tell me you haven't made love to at least half a dozen women in the last year?"

"A man can make love without loving."

"Oh, yes; I know —"

"You do not answer me."

She dropped her eyes, then raised them — the direct look of the Anglo-Saxon woman so baffling to the Italian man. "Do you really think you need to doubt my loyalty without evidence or reason?"

"I love you," he said in Italian.

"I love you too. You know that," she answered in the same tongue, adding in English in a different tone, "But that is no reason why we should act like an opera. Someone is coming."

Griscom and Willard Wright had come out on the

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veranda to smoke. "That Dago count is just crazy about his wife, isn't he!" Willard glanced at the couple approvingly as he made his characteristic comment. Griscom did not respond. "I don't wonder," Willard continued, "she is a fascinating woman — sort of uncertain, like that perfume she uses. Now you get it and now you don't. You never know just where you are at with her. She keeps you guessing. She isn't as pretty as Mrs. Loring, but I bet she's had lots of men in love with her in her day just the same."

"Had?" said Griscom.

The boy stared with the open eyes of a child. "Well, of course. She is a married woman now."

Griscom smiled. "So was Francesca."

Willard wondered what he meant by that. Then seeing the count and his wife turning as if to leave the verandah, he hurried after them.

"Count," he said boyishly, "there is an awfully pretty girl inside who is dying to meet you. I promised her I would try to persuade you."

Varesca hesitated an instant. He was to Griscom's eyes bearing the traces of some excitement.

"Go meet the pretty girl, Mario," his wife urged him. He looked at her, still doubtful. "Be very nice to her, but not too nice or I shall be jealous." She made a little face, lightly and affectionately mocking him. Somehow the little manoeuvre had the desired effect. He went off smiling.

"Count Varesca seems to have had a devastating effect

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upon all the young women present," Griscom remarked after a moment's silence.

"I think the Italian men are attractive to us," the countess in accepting generalized it. "They have the adoring manner and in point of fact we are terribly important to them, the most important thing in life, and that is naturally gratifying."

"Yes, I suppose women do prefer the sort of man who adores effectively."

There was another pause. "I see you are not in Turkey yet," she said.

"How do you know? This may be my astral body."

She touched his tweed sleeve with the tips of her fingers. "You feel real." It was a scarcely perceptible touch but she read consciousness of it in his face and spoke again hurriedly:

"Do you want to go? I suppose you do or you wouldn't."

"Oh," he drew a sad breath. "It is terrible, indescribably terrible to be there in sight of such horrors as one cannot even dream of without having been in their midst, and not be able to help. It does a man good perhaps to get in contact with something so much bigger than himself, so much bigger than any individual tragedy can be; to see other men, myriads of them, calmly face torture, death and dismemberment in the fight for civilization."

"I can't bear to think of it."

"Nor I to write about it," he said. "It is too tremendous. How petty the journalist's chronicle of battles

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or even the greatest epic of nations ever written — beside that real titanic struggle.”

She noted how thin and worn he looked. It was almost a month since she had seen him. She thought of him in the midst of the dangers of that mysterious half-savage Mahommedan country. He would be protected in a sense, yet none too safe. She shuddered.

“ Oh, how do women bear it — how do they *bear* it — to send their men out like that to die — ”

The note of anguish in her voice cut him like a two-edged sword. She was thinking, of course, of her husband, pledged perhaps in a possible emergency to serve his country.

“ Don’t talk about it any more. Look at the sunlight on that meadow — smell that syringa. Don’t think I am heartless or selfish . . . it just won’t bear thinking about.”

“ It won’t. I understand,” he said.

She had seated herself upon the low railing of the verandah. He noted the light, soft grace of her action, her dark eyes under the shadow of her hat, the red rose in her dress. Every little accent and expression of her personality struck him vividly, hurt him with the sense of her remoteness. She was not his to fight or live for. Her allegiance, her obligations, her heartaches even — were bound up with the destiny of another land.

The soft inexpressible intoxication and longing of the Spring, the strong scent of the syringa,— all the awakening of the warm earth that she had recalled to his

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senses — belonged to love, but it was not for him. He turned his face sharply aside to shut out the sight of her. Yet the consciousness of her enveloped him like the very concentrated essence of the Spring.

Her voice recalled him. "You would not accept Paolo's little invitation to supper. He was so disappointed."

"I couldn't," he said in a low voice.

"You refused me too —"

"Yes — I know."

Mario appeared on the verandah. As he came toward her a vivid yet utterly impersonal sense of his physical beauty swept over her. Mario was the ideal prince of the fairy tale. No wonder women were foolish about him. Once in the days when beauty more than strength compelled her, she too had responded to that spell.

"Mr. Loring told me you were still out here. I have a telephone message that will take me back to town at once." Mario spoke as he reached her side after saluting Griscom. "About that piece of property in Westchester that you are so anxious to sell," he explained.

She rose. "I'll be ready directly."

"There is no necessity to take you away. Indeed there is no time if I am to catch this train. I must see the man at once, but nothing will be settled till to-morrow. You had better stay here overnight with your aunt as you planned."

"I would rather go with you."

"I don't see how you can. There is only the doctor's

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runabout with but one vacant seat to be had at the moment. He has offered to take me to the station."

"The Whites will take us in their machine."

"No time for plans, *cara mia*." Her evident anxiety to go with him reassured her husband.

Percy Loring, who had followed the count in his leisurely fashion, joined them. He dreaded the outside air upon his bare head but something at that moment was stronger than his omnipresent fear for his health. "I will see that the contessa gets home safely," he said.

"I was about to beg the privilege," said Griscom.

"Oh, thank you. We came with the Whites; I am expecting to go back with them," Nina carelessly disposed of it.

"Have no fear, count," Percy Loring solemnly assured him. "You may safely leave the contessa in my care."

The count's face darkened. "You are very good, Mr. Loring," he said, and turning quickly walked away.

"I'll learn your pleasure later as to times and seasons, contessa," said Percy, for the breeze ruffled his thin locks and he was nervous.

Again Nina and Griscom were left alone.

"Why won't you go with me?" he said; "unless of course you prefer our author's society?" Their eyes met in a smile of understanding.

"I haven't the faintest intention of going with Mr. Loring."

"Or with me apparently —"

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She laughed. "I came with the Whites, you know; I have no just cause for desertion."

"It wasn't because — I lost my head that last night?"

"Did you lose your head? I can't imagine it."

He bit his lip and glanced away. "I am glad if you have forgotten it."

Against his will his eyes returned to her, and as he did so suddenly, exquisitely, she smiled. Turning he saw a man in the livery of the club-house holding a little boy by the hand.

"Paolo," she said. "He is staying out here with my aunt. We let him come over to watch the polo today. One of the club-house waiters is an Italian and begged to be allowed to take him about."

Paolo began to run as he caught sight of his mother. She lifted him up in her arms, set him beside her on the verandah and kissed him. The madonna light had come into her face. Glancing at Griscom she saw without understanding a strange look in his eyes.

"Do you know who that is, Paolo?" she asked the child.

Paolo looked at the tall man with his great eyes, his father's eyes, and began to smile, the languishing smile of Italy; then with the flash of recognition, the characteristic unconscious coquetry of the Italian child vanished, and the light of real gladness played over his face. "Mr. Griscom," he cried, "I remember! Mr. Griscom." Then he slipped down from his mother's arms and ran up to him.

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"How are you, old man? I am awfully glad to see you." Griscom smiled and put out his hand, but the child's sensitive face fell.

"He isn't glad to see me," he said.

"Of course I am, Paolo, but you have grown — you are so large I hardly knew you."

But the light would not come back to Paolo's face. "I knew you," he said.

His mother spoke in Italian to the waiting Neapolitan, asking him to show the child the stables where the polo ponies were housed. "Then bring him back to me," she said.

Radiant, the two children — the servant and the little count — went off together. Nina's eyes followed them with a smile.

"Italy is the true democracy, I sometimes think. They have a democracy of happiness — everyone rejoices with him who rejoices, peasant or prince; a democracy of sex for any man may admire any woman, it is tribute not impertinence; a democracy of art for their art is the property of all — if you were Percy Loring you would tell me that I had thought that out before — and I have."

"I think in your heart you love Italy better than America," he said.

She smiled with her little shrug. "*Qui lo sa!*"

"Don't talk Italian to me," he said, almost harshly, then broke off. "I am rude. Forgive me. My nerves are all gone to-day. I hope I didn't hurt Paolo's feelings."

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"For the moment perhaps, he has talked so much about you; but children forget easily — and he has his silver sword, to prove that his knight of the Snow mountain has not forgotten him."

"Oh — his little face —" She turned, startled by the sound in Griscom's voice,—"his child and yours . . . your child with his eyes . . . It is torture of a sort, Nina Varesca — it is weak, I know — I don't expect you to understand. Women like you show a man how weak he is — that is why I couldn't come to see him after I had seen you with your husband. I compelled myself to go once. You were out. It grew harder all the time. I hadn't strength to go again. Now you understand. I have the courage to run away from you — but I am not strong enough to stand by and see you with the man who has a right to take you in his arms —"

His unexpected outbreak struck her with something like terror. "Don't," she cried out instinctively, "you mustn't say things like that."

He recovered himself somewhat. "I know," he spoke more steadily. "I am saying the very things I vowed not to say — but you are strong wine, Nina Varesca. You go to a man's head."

Her face was turned so that he only saw the curve of her cheek and the shadow of her dark hair under her hat.

He spoke again, a strangled reluctant tone not like Griscom.

"It is a tremendous bond, a child — isn't it?"

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"Oh, yes — it is a bond. Even without love it is a bond."

"But with it —" he did not finish. She knew that he had not mastered the strong emotion that assailed him. "How strange life is! Why must so many of us love the wrong woman?"

She turned for an instant a white face upon him. "The wrong woman! Can it be the wrong woman if it is the right love! We talk of love as if it were a thing we knew. We have all met the things that masquerade under love's name,— passion, vanity, selfishness — but real love — how many of us have caught even a faraway glimpse of its face!"

He gave her a startled glance, then looked off across the golf links.

"Even real love is seldom free from those things," he said. "Just what do you mean by real love,— capacity for sacrifice?"

She shook her head. "More than that. A selfish love can obliterate self in a moment of strong emotion. Real love is —" She broke off and returned suddenly to her light tone. "We are like a Gibson illustration — golf links for background" — she made a gesture — "man and woman on the verandah telling each other what real love is."

He looked at her a grave moment. "I used to think I saw a little bit into the real woman," he said, "but I begin to feel like the Wright boy who said a few minutes ago, that one never knew where he was at with you."

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She smiled. "I wouldn't have supposed his healthy young mind capable of doubt on any subject." He had recovered his self-control, but before the thing that was in his eyes hers fell.

"Just once let me see in a little bit," he said. "What is the thing you find worthy to be called love?"

She answered without looking at him. "What I call love is something that can rise above passion, vanity, selfishness, even jealousy — something that only asks to serve, and wishes first of all what is best for the one it loves."

"Rise above passion, jealousy, selfishness," he repeated. "You mean rise above any sense of personal possession." She nodded without looking at him. "You did not say be free from these things."

"I suppose that would be scarcely human."

He glanced at her. She had loved enough to have sounded these depths! Mario Varesca — a man like that — had inspired such love in this woman? The blind pain of it set up that inward quivering again but he found strength to conquer it now. He stood a moment with his eyes upon the tender cloudlike green of the tree-tops against the blue Spring sky, then turned upon her with eyes that no longer avoided her.

"I will prove to you that my love is real. While I am here I will come to your house, accustom myself to seeing you with your husband and your child. I will be your friend and his, I will never speak of this hopeless madness again."

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She made no response, and when he permitted himself to look at her she had turned so that she faced the monotonous green expanse of the golf links.

The club-house door opened, breaking the silence, and Percy Loring came out drawing on what seemed to be an absolutely new pair of gloves.

"Are you ready, contessa?" he said. Percy sometimes preferred the elegance of the title to the intimacy of the Christian name.

She turned at the sound of his voice. "Oh, is it time to go?" Something in her face and voice caught the attention of both men. She was paler than usual, and her eyes looked unnaturally large and dark, the controlled mould of the lips had for the moment relaxed into lines of tragic suggestion. Griscom turned from the sight with a pang. He believed that she suffered in some way through the inconsequence of the man she loved. Percy Loring stared.

"That rose"—the author indicated the small fragrant Jacqueminot rose in her belt, "is the color of your lips." He considered her, his head on one side. "Yes, quite the continental effect,—red lips, radiant pallor, shadowy eyes—dare I ask for the rose, contessa?" He extended his hand.

Instinctively her hand closed over the flower. "Paolo gave it to me. Are the Whites waiting? I will get my wraps."

Percy Loring glanced at his watch. "We have half an hour for our ride. That will get you at your aunt's

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in good time before dinner and also permit us the long way through the woods. The poetry of the Maytime woods is something so few have felt adequately — or at least expressed — the Maytime woods,” he lingered over the words with a tender smile.

“Half an hour,” she exclaimed, turning, “why, it only takes five minutes!”

She considered the unworldly author a moment. “Are you turning your back on your own party and coming with us, Mr. Loring?”

Percy carefully buttoned his glove. “That is not just the arrangement, contessa; you are coming with me. The Whites, unfortunately, have gone, and your uncle has commended you to my care, as he seems anxious to finish his game.”

The countess regarded the author steadily. “I think you must be mistaken, Mr. Loring, I am sure the Whites would not go off without me.”

“Yes, most lovely countess, the Whites have indeed deserted you. I saw them drive off with these eyes. I think they had an impression —” Percy adjusted his glove with nice deliberation, “that you had left with the count —” which was strictly true, the author having been their authority for the impression.

“You have to take a train, I couldn’t think of burdening you, Mr. Loring. Don’t wait for me. I will find Uncle Wilfrid. He’ll look after me.” Nina turned to walk toward the door.

“You won’t find that an easy task, I fear. Your uncle

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is wandering about the links half a mile or more away." There was a gleam in Percy's eye.

At that moment Mildred came out on the verandah. She started back as she caught sight of Nina, but almost immediately recalled herself. "Percy, Fair is going now." She addressed her husband in a low voice, "and we ought to make this train too. You know Cousin Emma is coming tonight?"

"I had forgotten that, and now I have promised to take Nina to your aunt's. The count was unexpectedly summoned back to town. I will meet you at the station. But don't wait; if I miss this train, there is another in an hour that will leave me quite time enough to get home for dinner."

"I hope you won't miss it," Mildred was frankly wistful.

Nina went toward the door, Griscom followed her.

"Why won't you let me take you?" he said.

"It will make you late. It isn't necessary. If Uncle Wilfrid has asked Mr. Loring to take me I suppose I had better go with him. But will you find Luigi and ask him to bring Paolo here at once?"

Outside Percy Loring spoke to his wife with a tightening of the lips. "My dear, this is a situation into which I was forced, but I cannot have a scene over it now. I must take your cousin to the station, however much you may disapprove of her — and rightly."

"Of course, dear," replied Mildred quietly. "I had made no objection."

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Nina returning wrapped for departure, met Griscom on the inner side of the door.

"Luigi is bringing Paolo now," he said.

"Thank you so much." He saw that she held the small fragrant rose in her gloved hand. She held it out to him. "Paolo's little rose—will you take it? I couldn't bear to crush it with this heavy coat."

The words were spoken with a smile, and Griscom wondered if he had imagined the face he had seen a moment ago. He took the little flower wordless. She reached out toward the door, which was heavy and resisted. He put his hand out quickly, unintentionally covering hers—"Let me open it." She felt the strong vitality of his touch beat through her glove. The sense of it clung to her fingers, although the pressure had rested upon them but an instant.

"That door sticks. The house committee should be told of it." His tone was not steady.

Percy Loring, catching sight of her, hurried up. "You are ready, contessa?" He spoke in a low tone, glancing backward in the direction of his wife. "Of course, you will not consider going with Mr. Griscom. He has no vehicle here to take you in. You would have to wait for him to borrow a machine."

At that moment a light cart with one horse was led up by a groom, for whom, she noted, there was no seat in the conveyance.

"Here we are!" Percy Loring was in high spirits now. As she did not move, he added, "This is our trap."

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"*This!* The obsolete horse! Where did you find him? I thought we were going in your machine."

"You forget our car is not here. We came with the Brecks, who are about to depart with a full car. I thought you understood."

"I see; *you* have been borrowing," Nina smiled.

Two people, coming in from the golf links, greeted Mildred. Percy bent a benevolent regard upon Nina. "It is far more delightful to drive. The air is full of Spring, the moon is rising, the slender, crescent moon. One never appreciates the moon in a car, do you think?"

"Really, I hadn't taken the moon into consideration." Nina finished adjusting her veil and glanced at the stately author. "Wait a moment," she said, and, going down the steps, approached a little boy who, attended by an olive-skinned servant in the livery of the club-house, was making friends with a scatter-brained fox terrier impatiently awaiting his master's order to depart.

Mildred approached her husband. "You are going to drive, Percy?" Her tone was surprised. Idealistic as she was of her gifted husband, she was aware of his fear of horses and wondered.

"Nina preferred it, my dear," he replied with a deprecating shrug. "What could I do?"

"She preferred it? She didn't act as if she did."

Percy buttoned his light overcoat carefully about his throat. "My dear, I have long since given up expecting women to be consistent."

Mildred turned quickly aside to conceal the tears that

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sprang to her eyes. Nina came up to the verandah, leading Paolo by the hand, the light-headed canine leaping in their wake.

"Paolo is coming with us, Mr. Loring, instead of waiting for Uncle Wilfrid. He won't crowd us. I am sure you will be glad to have him."

Percy Loring's face became apoplectic. He was obliged to swallow twice before he contrived to say, "Delighted, I'm sure." And when he walked down the few steps he almost fulfilled his constant horror of stumbling.

CHAPTER XXVI

When Nina returned to her hotel alone the next morning, she found Mario out, and in her mail a note from Jane Worthing, containing the news for which Fair had prepared her,

"I am sailing for France on the twenty-ninth. I want to see you before I go. Jane."

An hour later she was sitting in Jane's upset studio, watching the preparatory stages of her packing. "You are so wonderful, Janie. Your life is one of service while I . . . am just a selfish drone. All I can do is to thank God my boys are not old enough to fight."

Jane touched her hair softly as she passed. "But I am not a mother, dear Nina. Remember I have nothing to lose and a little something to give. That is why I am going."

Nina's eyes traveled to the finished sketch of Paolo, which she was to take with her that day. "Yes — but in a few years they will be living their own lives, and for me then — what?"

Jane smiled that gentle, whimsical smile, that made Nina Varesca feel strangely young in life's wisdom beside her. "You will still be their mother, dear."

Jane opened another drawer and took out a large pile of sketches to be sorted. "There is Dan Griscom's book

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cover." She handed her friend a drawing in color. "You know he got me the order for the poster and the cover for his new book. You know that he is going over, too —"

"Now — on your boat?" Nina's voice had a startled note.

"Any minute," Jane answered. "I wish he weren't going quite so near the terrible Turk — although the terrible Prusse seems to be quite as treacherous. They send Dan to the dangerous places, you know, because he is brave and adventurous, without being foolhardy. Dan always has his head with him."

"The very foundations of the world seem to be crumbling." Nina spoke after a long silence. "It feels like the day of judgment. I have hardly dared to let myself think. But sometimes it comes to me on a sleepless night. We are going too, in a few weeks."

"Your husband will not be involved if Italy should enter the war?"

"Not unless they call for the third reserves."

She stayed with Jane till lunch time, but refused her invitation to remain, being anxious not to miss Mario again. Although no steps could be taken without her consent in the business matter that he was presumably attending, her American distrust of Latin methods made her anxious to acquaint herself with the facts as soon as possible.

At the hotel she found a telephone message from her husband, written down in the dialect of the telephone

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boy — for she had left Assunta in the country with Paolo — requesting her to meet him at three o'clock in the lawyer's office.

Although she was prompt, she found him already there waiting, and when she met his eyes she saw in them the same look they had had in the stormy days before their marriage.

"You went home with your cousin's husband?" was the first question he asked her. He spoke in Italian.

"Mr. Loring seemed to have arranged with Uncle Wilfrid to be my escort." His wife answered it as a question of no import.

Mario gave an exclamation. "*Capisco.*"

"Paolo was with us," Nina added. "How intuitive children are! He seems to like our cousin-in-law as little as we do."

But Mario's reply was inarticulate. He was restless and impatient during the business transaction which only detained them a few minutes, and in the cab sat in a black silence while his wife, seeming oblivious of his mood, maintained a constant light flow of conversation.

"You know we are going to the opera with Mrs. Montague Smith, tonight. I took the risk of accepting for you, too, because it is a benefit for the wounded soldiers. Caruso and Luisa Castiglione in 'Pagliacci' and Destinn in 'Cavalleria.' I knew you would not want to miss that."

He showed no recognition of the name of the once favored Nedda. "If our hostess will permit us to leave before the end. I do not feel in the mood to talk."

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"Not even to pretty Mrs. Smith?"

He gave a little ejaculation of self mockery. "I think of no one but you, now. You know that."

She laughed softly with her air of affectionate mockery.

"You laugh—" his voice shook. "Yet you know well that if I spend time with other women, it is to forget the one that has power to hurt my heart."

"Do I know just that, Mario?" She smiled daringly into his sombre face. "Is there then, no woman who has made you for a little while—let us say—forget my existence?"

"There is none—" and indeed she knew that in that moment he believed his absolute statement to be true. "*Ma!* You do not care. You are cold, cold to me. Nothing that I do can pull at your heart."

"You know I am not jealous, Mario?"

His face darkened. "Why are you not? There is no love without jealousy."

"Ah, yes, there is."

"It is a kind I do not know or care about."

"It is the kind that lasts, dear."

He made an impatient movement. "I am jealous—then—jealous of these men of your country. You like them. They interest you. I see something different in your face when you talk with them. You sit up, there is a light in your eyes. With me you lean back, you laugh. You play with me as a child."

"I would rather talk to them, perhaps, than to most

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Italian men. But you are not jealous of talk, Mario."

"Of what do men and women talk in the end, if not of love?"

She smiled again. "That is a difference, you don't understand. American men do not talk of love — at least not in the way Italians do."

"Of what then —"

"Oh — books, things, amusements, life —"

"*Ma!* All talk leads to but one thing with a woman like you. . . *Dio!*" He clenched his gloved hand and frowned into the muddy, traffic-choked street. "How ugly it is! How hideous! Everything hurts the eye. I am wretched. I want you to myself, back under our skies of Italy." Suddenly he turned, caught her in his arms and kissed her fiercely.

"Mario —" she disengaged herself breathlessly. "Please don't — here in the street. It is light, people can see."

He stared out the cab window, looking away from her. She heard his uneven breath. Her heart was beating like a hammer against her sides, not as it had once quickened at his kiss, but with a different shock, the knowledge,— final, irrevocable, tearing away the very last veil from her innermost self that she could no longer endure association with her husband on these terms. If he would accept such affection as she gave her son — yes. But not this passionate demand of the lover. She had shrunk from it before, now she could no longer endure it. Something deep, instinctive, fundamental within her, rose in protest

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and cried out as against violation. She, Nina Varesca, disciplined, civilized, had felt the impulse to strike out physically against that seizure as fiercely as a Latin woman.

She glanced at him and met his eyes. He was gnawing his lip. His face was pale and discomposed, his eyes, a slumbering fire.

She tried to smile. "What a volcano!"

"Are you not afraid that it will some time destroy?"

She shook her head. "I know my Italy too well. The volcano sends out flames and smoke, but it does not destroy."

He laughed with a quick indrawing of the breath. "You are so sure that you understand the Italian heart!"

She nodded. "It is a practical heart, as I have always told you. You like to be comfortable, you Italians. When emotions become painful,—pouf—you shrug them away."

"Do we then never kill for love?"

"In Napoli."

"My mother was *meridionale*."

"I never knew you to boast of it before."

"Ah," he caught her hands, the instinctive creature's swift impatience of protracted verbal parrying seized him—"words—words—what are words—"

Foreseeing another outbreak she drew back quickly. "Mario, please—don't forget we are on Fifth Avenue, almost home."

He dropped her hands. Unaccustomed to control, his

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face darkened with the tragic sense of denial. She looked at him almost wondering that she had no response to this vehement love-making of his. His face — beautiful as the men's faces in the portraits of the Renaissance — was alight with the fiery passions of a long line of men who had loved life and used it recklessly. The subdued flame-like quiver in his eyes made her close her own as from a sight she dreaded. She saw, with her cool recording senses, that the warm curved lines of his mouth were beautiful, yet she shrank from their kisses with a revulsion so sharp, so basic, that it terrified her.

The cab stopped at the hotel. She went ahead to her room. Mario stopped to send a telegram in the office, but in a moment she heard his step. He touched the bell, then tapped on the door, a characteristic knock that announced his identity. She opened it, hoping some chance distraction might have changed his mood, but the first glance at his face revealed the futility of this hope.

He followed her into the living room. She picked up some newly arrived letters, glanced through them and handed him one. "This is for you, Mario."

But his eyes were upon those in her hand. "And yours?" he asked. She threw them down indifferently for his inspection. "I don't believe you will find them interesting —" and turned to leave the room. He took a step toward her. She divined the approaching storm and took desperate refuge in the first subterfuge that suggested itself.

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"The bell," she murmured. "I think someone rang — Assunta is not here, you know."

He caught her hand, drawing her toward him. "Never mind the bell —"

She held back. "I expect something — part of my toilette for to-night. The shops make so many mistakes — I must open it to see if it is right —"

"Ah!" Almost violently he released her.

Trembling she went through the ruse of opening the door, then returning started to cross the room toward her bedroom door, but he met her half way standing in her path with folded arms. "It was not your package, then," he said.

"No. It was nothing. Something jarred the telephone perhaps —" It was the first time in their married life that she had dissembled like this.

He gave a short laugh. "You did not hear any bell. I understand," he said.

He stood still looking at her, his face flushed, the veins in his forehead swelling. Suddenly, with an outbreak of exclamations in Italian, he took a vase from the mantel and flung it violently to the floor, smashing it in pieces. His wife stood looking at the fragments. Long experience with the manifestations of his childish violence had brought her to the point of viewing them as commonplace.

"It was a pity you chose that vase, Mario, it is rather a good one," she said. He met her eyes trembling. At such moments her Northern quality of poise either calmed

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or infuriated him further. She turned and went into her own room. This time he did not try to prevent her. A moment later she heard him go into his own room and close the door violently.

She sank down in a chair exhausted. Perhaps he would go off now in one of his childish fits of resentment. She could only hope that he would. She heard him moving about his room and wondered. Then catching sight of the clock she rose hurriedly and rang for the chambermaid. In any case she had accepted Mrs. Montague Smith's invitation and she must get dressed. But the hotel servant's abilities proved to be of the elementary sort, so that, certain fastenings in inaccessible spots achieved with her coöperation, the countess was glad to dismiss her and conclude her toilet without assistance.

As she was fastening a gold net work head ornament over her hair, Mario knocked at the door and presented himself dressed for the evening. "You look like a donna di Luini with that head-dress," he remarked. His voice was quieter. Evidently, the explosion had somewhat cleared the air.

"I am glad you didn't say Mona Lisa. Don't you like it?" She looked up to meet his eyes. The fire had given place to a wistful sadness.

He picked up a piece of ivory from her toilette table and played with it with nervous hands. "I do not approve of it," he said.

"Is it too conspicuous? I will take it off."

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"Not that. But it seems unnecessary to make yourself more dangerous."

She walked into the larger room where the cloth was laid for dinner. The waiter was temporarily out of the room. She spoke suddenly to him out of her real self.

"It is only for that — for what little beauty I have that you care, Mario *mio*. If I should lose it you wouldn't love me any more. You do not care for anything real in me —"

"I do not care for anything real?" He stared. "What do you mean?"

She answered in a different tone. "What Mildred would call my soul."

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't."

He seemed to attach no importance to her momentary seriousness. "I cannot imagine you otherwise than as you are," he said.

That was Mario, she reflected. She gave him a glimpse into her real self, and he could only see her from his characteristic standpoint, he must ever relapse into his racial groove of thought. The waiter entered with the soup and she began to talk of the opera singers they were to hear that night.

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"Not exactly. Yet something of my own composition . . . rather more personal."

"Yes?" She waited for his further elaboration, with eyes deliberately wandering.

"Need I say more? It has gone anonymously in the script of the typewriter—the vehicle of the modern bard—but you will identify both the poet and his inspiration." He glanced backward with a stiff movement of the neck—Percy was ever apprehensive of the listening ear—"I am not avowedly a writer of verse, as you know—although they call me a poet. But there are certain emotions, impressions, that seem to demand the lyric form—" he broke off abruptly, having become suddenly aware of the eavesdropper he was always anticipating; for, while the contessa's smile was vague, Percy perceived that he had the entire attention of the count. Something in the stare of the Italian's dark eyes made the great man so nervous that he hastily addressed himself to Mrs. Montague Smith. The contessa in the interval seemed to become fascinated by the conversational powers of Montague Smith, and after several unsuccessful attempts to attract her interest, the author rose, his wounded vanity writhing visibly upon his features.

"Now for more jealousies and bloodshed. I suppose to you dwellers in sunny Italy," he glanced from the count to the countess, "these childish tragedies of impulse seem very serious. But I," with a gesture, "hunger for the heights of Walhalla."

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"Certainly, the tragedy of Pagliacci does not seem childish to me," responded the count.

"The violence is childish." The author seemed to address someone in the auditorium upon whom he directed his opera glass.

"Your point of view would not do you honor in our country," returned the count, yet so lightly that his words did not seem even a discourtesy. "It is the difference between the childish hot-blooded south and the grown up philosophical north, is it not so?" The count permitted his amusement to become perceptible in his smile.

The author disclaimed decision. His gaze remained fixed upon the house. Presently, however, he lowered his glass and smiled as one contemplating his own reflection in the glass. "I am recognized." He addressed the countess. He gave a significant glance at the audience. "It is one of the drawbacks. We live our lives in the open."

Montague Smith glanced at him, a flippant gleam in his apoplectic eye. "I suppose there are drawbacks to standing in that light that beats about a throne," he remarked, with a smile that his wife afterwards accused of having been a grin. He did not care for Percy Loring and had once shocked his wife by referring to him as a "solemn ass."

"Dear me," Percy Loring turned his shoulder upon the auditorium. "One woman — actually — quite staring me out of countenance." But he found that he did not

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have the contessa's attention and after general farewells, with a small tight smile, he bowed himself out.

"Dear Mr. Loring does not, perhaps, entirely understand the romantic Italian psychology," Mrs. Montague Smith remarked.

Nina gave her an amused glance. "But after all, isn't it the Anglo-Saxon who is truly romantic,—the practical American, and the so-called phlegmatic Englishman? You remember 'John Bull's Other Island.'"

"Yes, I suppose the Anglo-Saxon is sentimental," Mrs. Montague Smith agreed, "especially the American Anglo-Saxon, but he lacks, in the reviewer's phrase of the hour, the grand gesture. That is the thing that the Continental preëminently has."

"The Continental is less self-conscious," Nina defined, "but I think, more practical—oh, ever so much more practical at heart." She looked at her husband lightly including him,—“You hear, Mario?”

Mario Varesca met her eyes and nodded acquiescence. Something indefinable in his faint smile caught Mrs. Montague Smith's attention. "Count Varesca does not agree with you, perhaps," she suggested.

"Oh, I do not speak of Mario. I have never thought of him as like other men, and I should be heartbroken, if he didn't realize that I am not like other women." She sketched her little hasty affectionate caricature for him lightly with her smile. It had its effect, rather more than she had desired indeed. His face became radiant with a quick childlike happiness. Mrs. Montague Smith's

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romantic soul was thrilled at contemplation of the picture, and even Montague Smith told himself with a mild oath that it was a good thing that pretty picture-book count appreciated what he had got.

The curtain rose upon Pagliacci. Nina, released from the necessity to talk, watched her husband's face. In spite of her belief in what she had called the practical Italian heart, she was conscious that there was something that seemed more serious about this mood of his. The fear even shot through her for an instant, that Mario might do something foolish. There was a sombreness in his expression, now that his face was at rest, that suggested disturbing possibilities. But how foolish she was,—the Italian dramatic face, an inherited face. Mario's great grandparents might have done desperate deeds because of some woman, but never comfort-loving Mario.

The opera had progressed to the point of Canio's tragic outbreak, that impassioned outpouring of Italian melody that seldom fails to bring forth storms of applause, even when not sung by the greatest tenor of Italy.

At the conclusion, Mario rose. A glance at him set Nina's heart beating with apprehension, although her face gave no intimation of the fact.

"Oh, must you go?" Mrs. Montague Smith exclaimed, her voice half lost in the confusion of shouts and clapping hands. The curtain rose disclosing the stricken husband now radiantly smiling. The applause died down as he signed to the conductor, who raised his baton.

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"He is going to sing it again," Mrs. Montague Smith exclaimed as excitedly as if the whole thing had not occurred dozens of times before. Mario, still standing, leaned against the wall, his eyes upon his wife, and the amiable tenor discovered his wife's faithlessness anew, proclaiming his despair in terms of melodic anguish, and again at the end broke into the convulsive sobs for which no man of the expressive races feels shame.

"Nothing would induce me to leave before the end," Mrs. Montague Smith announced. "You see,—the romantic Anglo-Saxon!"

"But this, after all," said Mario, "is the climax of the music. You have given us already our full quota of pleasure."

As they waited in the lobby for their carriage, raw gusts of wind and rain blowing in with the constant opening of the door — for the warm Spring weather had been followed by a return to November — she wondered how she was to meet the storm that she saw gathering in his eyes.

Alone in the motor, in the darker side street, he took her in his arms. She nerved herself to bear it. She must somehow conceal from him her real feeling. She could not hope to turn this mood. She remembered one other like it, the second year of their marriage, when he had become in some way conscious of the change in her, and his jealousy had fastened upon a French artist who was painting her portrait. That mood had passed as he

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became reassured of her affection and the untruth of his suspicions. This must pass also.

He was covering her with his kisses,—her lips, her hands, her wrists, crushing them fiercely in his. Suddenly he stopped, breathing hard. “Do I hurt you?”

“Yes.” Her cool monosyllable seemed to madden him.

“I hurt you again — so — so — why don’t you cry out? Ah — *Dio, basta* — there is no way I can move you! I am nothing to you but a child, a toy, a joke —”

“Mario — don’t,—don’t be so foolish. After all these years — surely you know,—you understand.”

He dropped her hands and withdrew to the farther corner of the cab.

“You shrink from me,” he said in a low voice at last. “I feel it. Your lips are cold. I cannot warm them. They do not answer — they do not even receive. I kiss the corpse of my love.” He seized her again in a shaking grasp. “What is it? . . . Why is it? You no longer love me —”

“Yes, yes, Mario —”

“No — you do not love me any more. There is someone else. Is it that old man who loves women? Is it Loring? I heard what he said to you to-night — he is mad about you, that man, I know, I saw — is he the one? You do not answer —”

“Mario, how preposterous, how insane. How can you ask such a thing! Have you no sense of humor —” But she could not quite control her voice and she saw that she had not disarmed his suspicions.

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"Whoever it is, I shall find him, never fear, I shall know —"

"Mario — you foolish boy." She put her hand up to his cheek, but he pushed it from him.

"A foolish boy — yes, do not touch me. It is indeed, as if I were a child! *Never* touch me again if you cannot love me as I love — *mai* —"

Never! How easily they said it, these Italians, without any real implication of its finality. She was familiar with that childish "*mai!*" And yet in their moods of destructive violence, they were capable of a terrible finality of action. As the cab passed into the area of light by the hotel she was shocked by the sight of Mario's face. Was there, after all, something in this graver than a mere outbreak of jealous passion? For the second time that night apprehension laid its cold finger upon her heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

As Nina sat in the living-room answering some notes that had come in the noon mail, Mario entered holding an open letter in a shaking hand.

"So this is that poem of which he spoke last night — words that burn — he sends to you — my wife — type-written — without his name — a secret intrigue. How well he knows that you will understand who it is that writes to you of love —"

She met his dilating eyes with her inscrutable quietness. "Mario, what *are* you talking about?"

He struck the paper in his hand. "This — this love poem from your cousin's husband — it was of this he spoke to you last night."

"You have the advantage of me, Mario. I have not read the poem."

Her coolness, instead of allaying his suspicions, only maddened him. "Read then — let us see how you will explain —" He held it toward her, then as violently withdrew it. "No, no, you shall not read it." He crushed it in his hand. "You know well enough what it says."

"I do not, but I am willing to let my curiosity remain ungratified. You know I do not admire his style."

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“*Dio!*” Mario’s volcanic passion having carried him to the point where for the moment coherent speech was impossible, he sank panting upon a chair.

His wife’s eyes rested upon him, and after a moment she spoke quietly: “If you but knew, Mario, how tired I am of these scenes over nothing!”

“After your protestations, your denials last night, you receive this — you cannot deny —”

She interrupted his broken accusations. “I have never learned any way of protecting myself against receiving undesirable letters, have you, Mario?” As he did not answer except for whispered ejaculations in Italian, she went on in the same tone: “How can you be so illogical as to hold me responsible for the bad poetry — I presume it is bad — that an unpleasant susceptible old man inflicts upon me?”

“An old man, *per Baccho!* He is not too old to love, not too old to marry a woman of your own age who seems also to love him! How do I know what kind of man a woman will love — most of all you, you strange American!”

There it lay at the bottom of his mind, as she had known it did — the Latin’s fundamental distrust of the alien woman. The years of their marriage had made no difference. Woman to him was and must ever be, a creature of whim, of impulse. Love as he understood it was a thing dissociated from mind — the matter of a trick of an eyelash, the curve of a lip, the sound of a voice. He conceived of love, therefore, as a lightning

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that might strike in any place, even the most unlikely. He started to his feet and began smoothing out the crumpled paper in his hand.

"We shall see what she has to say about it —"

She glanced up quickly. "Who?"

"His wife."

"Mario," Nina's tone was suddenly stern. "Have you taken leave of your senses? I forbid you to show that letter to Mildred." It was the first time she had ever spoken to him like that. For a moment he stared in astonishment, then began to laugh. "*Dio, you forbid! You, a woman, forbid a man, your husband —*"

She repeated more quietly. "I forbid you to show that poem to Mildred. Remember, you have opened a letter directed to me; an act that seems to be permissible in your country, but it is a thing no American or Englishman who calls himself a gentleman, would dream of doing."

Never before had she come squarely to an issue with him on these matters of fundamental difference; never before had she permitted him to realize the gulf that she had glimpsed in the first year of their marriage.

She saw that he shook from head to foot, and knew with her subtilized intuition that it was not the usual storm of anger, jealousy or passion. Some new element, something that he, himself, least of all, understood, had entered into it.

"*Proviamo, proviamo,*" he whispered. "Now, we begin to come at the truth."

She went on calmly, "I will not have Mildred made

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wretched over this absurd poem. She thinks that I have been trying to have a flirtation with her husband. It is not pleasant for me to have her think such a thing about me, but it does not hurt me as it would hurt her to find him out." She rose, his eyes remained upon her. Although he still doubted her, her strength and some other quality in her that he could not have named dominated him. His arms fell at his sides and he was silent.

"Tear that paper up," she directed him. "I have not seen it, as you know, and I don't want to see it."

A pale smile flickered over his face. "Naturally, it is not the only copy," he said, but his tone had changed.

"Tear it up, Mario." She repeated the command as she would have spoken to her child, and silently he obeyed her, letting the torn pieces of paper drift to the floor. Then with one of his violent emotional transitions — with the instinct of the creature of sense to reach out for the reassurance of touch, he caught her hands, flinging aside her letters, and tried to draw her toward him.

"True or false I cannot live without you. I cannot *live* unless you are mine —"

Then for the first time she resisted sharply, turning her face aside from his kiss. "Don't — don't touch me!" she said.

He obeyed her instantly and stood a full moment white and motionless, his burning eyes upon her face, without attempting to move in her direction. "So, it has come to this! I am not to touch you any more," he said in a strange voice.

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"Not now —" she half whispered — "not now."

"*Un'altra volta*," he murmured, in what she called his theatrical manner, "I understand."

She faced him desperately, taking refuge in the fact never before made fully explicit between them: "You expect me always to welcome your touch, always to receive when you wish to give . . . never to remember — that you come to me from other women."

"I come to you from other women?" he interrupted her. "What do you mean?" He dissembled as she had always known he would faced with the concrete statement. The hope that this hard mood of hers was after all prompted by jealousy, just another of her unfamiliar, incomprehensible, alien manifestations of emotion struggled with the instinctive recognition of her inability to respond to his passion that had lashed him to madness while he held her in his arms. But the hope served to somewhat restore his balance.

"Does a man infatuated with one woman come to another as I come to you? Of whom are you speaking?"

"I will make no accusations. You cannot resist that impulse to deny, and, you see, we Anglo-Saxons cannot bear to be lied to. You know the truth in your heart. You exact all of me, you know that you have not given me all of yourself. I do not ask the liberty you take. I only ask to be spared these jealous scenes which insult me. They are ignominious."

"I have given you the best of myself. No other woman can tear at my heart, make me tremble with the

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touch of her fingers, as you can,— you whom I have possessed, you who should be after these years *mia moglie*, the mother of my children, not a torturing flame.”

She pitied him as she had before, for in his violent childish way she knew that he suffered. “ You have no reason to suspect me of intrigues, Mario. My — affection for you has not changed. But just now you said something hard to forget — and for the moment I don’t want you to touch me — that is all. I am sorry if I make you suffer. Our ways are different, but I remain your wife, the mother of your children. In a short time we shall be going back together to our home. Please try to see it all sanely. Try not to misunderstand.”

She turned and left him standing there, and going into her own room closed the door. Her heart was beating violently. She had not meant to let things come to an issue between them like this. What was it that had made his touch at last so unendurable to her that she had suddenly been unable to control herself? Not his jealousies or his suspicions, to which she had been long accustomed, but the deep-down penetrating sense that she belonged to another man. To him had been given her soul’s allegiance, some supreme and final gift of herself that had not been taken from Mario, for it had never been his. Something that was indeed not hers voluntarily to give, since it was not a gift to be bestowed, but something summoned like worship from the innermost recesses of her being. And this consciousness, including as it did all of herself, forbade her, although she might never give herself to the

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man she loved, to admit the lover's claims of another, however legal his right by men's laws.

Alone in the room she had left, Mario bent his head upon his arms and sobbed. She heard it through the closed door, and cowered shivering upon her couch. She could not go to him, it would only bring upon her the demonstration she dreaded. Mingled with her compassion for his suffering was a warring impulse, hard, unsympathetic, alien,—her old revulsion from the childishness that was not ashamed of such womanish expression. All the Anglo-Saxon in her awoke and resented Mario's demonstrative uncontrol. It was indecent to show one's feelings like that. . . .

He did not go out all that afternoon, and about half past six she knocked at his closed door. "Have you seen the evening paper, Mario?" She held it out to him as she spoke. "It says that Italy may enter the war at any moment." She had hoped with her news to change the current of his thought. But he only turned from the window to stare at her with haggard eyes.

"They have been saying it for months."

"But this time I am afraid it is true—read it and see."

He made an impatient gesture. "I don't want to see it. I don't care."

"We were going to the theatre this evening to see that new Viennese light opera. Had you forgotten?"

"I shall not go." Mario relapsed into his dogged contemplation of the grimy roof tops.

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She knew it was useless to attempt to move him in this mood. The plan for the evening must be given up. What could she do? To remain at home would probably mean a repetition of the afternoon's scene.

As she stood irresolute at the end of her resources, feeling something almost like panic stealing over her, the telephone rang and she went to answer it, not forgetting to leave Mario's door open.

It was Edith Wickham, who after presupposing that it was useless to ask, invited Nina to go with her to hear the Kneisels that night. Her husband, usually her companion, had failed her at the last minute.

With alacrity Nina accepted Edith's invitation, then returned slowly to tell Mario.

"With Mrs. Wickham?" The suspicion she had been prepared for immediately rose in his voice.

"Would you like to escort me to the concert to prove that I am telling you the truth, Mario?"

"*Dio — Dio!*" With an exclamation of bewildered pain his head sank upon his hands. "What can one do against a woman like you? You are hard, you are strong — what is it about you that draws the heart out of one's body? The power is all in your hands."

Yes — but if it were not she could have been the one to break her heart over it while he made love to other women, like so many of the Italian wives she knew.

She lingered a moment before leaving him to dress for dinner, to remind him of their engagement for the next day. "Tomorrow, you know, we are going down to

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Lakewood for the horse show. Do you still care to go?"

"What matter how I decide? You will go without me if it is your desire."

"I have had to go without you so many times, *cattivo*, when I would have wished to have you with me."

"You wish it no longer."

"Oh, Mario —" she turned from him wearily. "Then you will not go to-morrow?"

"No."

Still she lingered. What was it that she feared almost more than his wild outbreaks of love-making? "Is there anything else you would rather do?"

He laughed bitterly. "Am I a child that I must be amused? That is it. To you I am ever a child. I love you with a man's love but it is a love that must hunger and ache. You give me nothing now but your cold kindness. Once you gave me back my kisses — but now I hold in my arms a Galatea that I may not make alive."

She turned toward him in desperation. "Am I not here under your roof, your wife, submitting my time, my plans, my life, to yours?"

"I should be thankful for what I have lest it be taken from me, is that it?" He flashed a bitter smile upon her. Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him. "If Italy should enter the war it will be best perhaps that we send for the *bambino*, and remain here for the present, will it not?" He watched her closely.

"That is for you to decide."

"It may be that I shall decide so." She noted that his

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smile was peculiar and wondered what lay behind his words. "You would prefer it, would you not?"

"I do not care. If I could do anything to help I would rather be there."

She moved toward the door. "I must dress for dinner now."

"I do not dine at home this evening."

"No? Then I hope you will find something or someone to amuse you."

But it was in no mood for the pure, classic measures of Mozart and Beethoven that she sat beside serene Edith Wickham and listened to a program that in other circumstances would have given her supreme enjoyment.

When she got home she was not surprised to find that Mario had not returned.

CHAPTER XXIX

One morning about a week after the afternoon at the country club, Percy Loring and his wife were sitting in their library while the author went through his mail. Mildred, just past the convalescent stage of a sharp attack of pleurisy — the result, her husband felt sure, of her game of tennis with Willard Wright — was embroidering initials upon some handkerchiefs to be dedicated to her husband's use. The author liked to have his wife near him for sympathy and response at this morning ceremony of opening the mail.

After a more than ordinarily long silence he looked up from a sheet of pink note-paper with the smile that Mildred found so beautiful. "Listen to this, my dear. It is from a devoted young reader in Kalamazoo — a more than usually interesting confession. A young girl who has had, it seems, a singularly tragic life of misunderstanding and lives in a sordid unideal environment, was about to take her own life when she chanced to read my 'Silver Cloud,' and it made her think that if there were people with such beautiful thoughts in the world she could have the courage to live. The Courage to Live — that is a beautiful phrase. I must remember it."

His wife listened with glowing eyes. "I am sure, Percy dear, that your own thoughts are more beautiful."

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There was a shadow in Percy's smile. "But we may accept suggestions, my dear, even from the humblest source. Sometimes in your adoration of me, I'm afraid you tend to be a little narrow." He handed Mildred the letter, however, as evidence of the greatness of his spirit even in correction. Mildred read it all and glanced up.

"How wonderful! Dear Percy, it seems almost terrible to have such power over people's lives!"

Percy replied thoughtfully, "It is a responsibility certainly."

Mildred's adoring eyes dwelt reverently upon his face. "Percy, how did you ever happen to love me!" she whispered.

He patted her hand absently, opening another letter. "Because you were worthy, most dear." He threw the letter he had opened aside — it was a request for help from some obscure charity — and picked up another handful. "A regular sheaf today. You sifted out the bills, didn't you, my dear? And I haven't shown you the beautiful one I got last night. A wonderful testimonial, almost as touching in its way as this one from little Ruby Smith." The author felt in his pocket, bringing out several letters which he turned over awkwardly — he lacked precision of touch although his hands were small for a man of his height. At that moment Delia knocked.

"A gentleman from Mr. Creston wid some papers, sir. There's something he wants to ask you. He told me but I didn't just understand."

Percy Loring frowned. "Thus life intrudes upon our

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beautiful moments! I'll see him in the reception room." He turned to his wife, handing her one of the letters. "Don't go till I return, my dear. Make yourself happy reading the letter."

She looked up at him with a smile as she took it, and Percy Loring left the room, closing the door behind him. He had an antipathy to open doors.

Mildred bent her immediate eager interest upon the letter. For a moment her smile still lingered, then bewilderment seemed to cloud her face. Percy had made some mistake, he had given her the wrong letter. This was not his letter . . . not written to him. . . . Her eyes went back to the address at the beginning. Yes, it *was* his letter. Why had he given it to her to read? Some unfortunate woman — a begging, almost a threatening letter — some mistake. She turned it over, a phrase caught her eye. She read on through the first page, then flung it from her and sat staring at it. She covered her face with her hands. Then slowly she reached out again for it and with senses abnormally clear read it through from beginning to end. She crushed it in her hand, then she opened it, smoothed it, re-read it, a terrible look coming upon her face. The room swam around her, then a distant sound brought back consciousness with a rush,— the closing of the street door. Percy would be coming back. She started up, ran from the room up the stairs to her bedroom on the floor above, locked the door and threw herself face downward on the bed.

As Percy Loring reentered the library and found it

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empty, a look of annoyance came upon his face. He touched the bell and Delia, with suspicious promptness, entered staring. She had seen the flight of her mistress and heard the turn of her lock.

"Do you know where Mrs. Loring is? I left her here only an instant ago."

"I think she wint into her room, sir. Shall I tell her?" The maid's curiosity was alert.

"No, never mind." Percy's second impulse was to discipline Mildred through disappointment. "She might detain me and I am in great haste." After a hurried fumbling among his papers he went out, leaving Delia trying to think of a valid excuse for knocking on her mistress' door, which, her mind not being one of great activity, she had not accomplished before Mildred, wearing a thick veil, came out of her room. She stopped to say in a tone which the servant recognized as unnatural, "Tell Mr. Loring when he returns that I shall not be home for lunch."

This message the interested Delia delivered to the master of the house when he returned at lunch time. It was obvious to her that the author was not pleased. She was sure now that they had had a "fight," she told the cook, who was disposed to sympathize with the man. Percy Loring was dyspeptic and therefore made light her labors.

After his solitary lunch Percy Loring sat down in a severe mood to correct proof sheets. This was the first time since they had been married that Mildred had will-

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ingly foregone the rapture of a meal with him. That she should have gone off without excuse, merely leaving a message with a servant, was inconceivable. The author's spirit was ruffled over the circumstance. He had expected to find her moist-eyed, reverent over the latest epistolary tribute to his genius. Instead she had inconsequently gone away without reason or excuse. He had spoiled Mildred a little — she had perhaps grown too accustomed to the honors, the privileges he had conferred upon her. The maid's tap at the door roused him. "How many times have you been told not to knock when I am writing," he exclaimed. It was like Mildred to have servants like Delia, he reflected irritably, a girl with no head.

"Shall I go away, sir?" The maid stood transfixed upon the threshold.

"Well, what is it?" The author waited impatiently. "Having interrupted me I suppose you might as well tell me what it is about."

"It's the countess, sir, to see Mrs. Loring. I thought maybe you'd know when she was comin' back."

"How could I know anything more than you do when it was you who gave me her message! Use your head a little, Delia." The words were severe but the author's tone had changed.

"Yes, sir," Delia murmured mechanically, deep in her speculations.

"The Countess Varesca, you say."

Percy Loring collected the loose proof sheets that scattered the table.

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"Yes, no doubt Mrs. Loring will be home soon. Did you tell her that we were not at home?"

"No, sir." "Not at home" having been the author's instructions, Delia might be counted upon to say the opposite.

"Then ask her to come up. In here. And don't tell her that Mrs. Loring is out. The countess is so afraid of disturbing me that if you tell her I am alone she might hesitate to come in, and I am *not* at home to anyone else. Bring me no more cards or messages. Mind now, get it straight," he concluded with sufficient sharpness to pierce the fog that more or less permanently beclouded Delia's mental processes.

He waited listening for the soft rustle of her skirt; a smile that Mildred did not know hovered about his lips. As his ear caught the first sound of her approach the smile flashed out in its completeness for a revealing instant. On the threshold the countess paused without entering.

"I mustn't disturb the author at work. I only stopped to enquire for Mildred. How is she? Is she still in bed? Fair Randolph tells me she has been seriously ill with the grippe. I did not know it or I should have come before."

"Mildred will be here directly. It would be impossible for a visit from you to be a disturbance, Nina. Enter and be seated."

Nina, moving over the threshold but without seating herself, repeated, "Is Mildred at home?"

Percy Loring continued to gaze at his visitor. In due time he said, "The countess is importunate. I had dared

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to hope that the little poem had met with her favor — but alas, you inquire only for Mildred. At the moment she is not at home. Didn't the maid tell you?"

Nina shook her head. "On the contrary."

"She is extraordinarily stupid. Dear Mildred is not very happy in the selection of her servants."

Nina turned toward the door. "I owe you an apology. I had no intention of disturbing you."

Percy Loring made such haste to cross the room that he stumbled over a chair. "My dear Nina, I beg — I cannot be so misinterpreted. You asked me. I was obliged to give you a truthful answer. But you must not deprive me of the pleasure — I want to see you — you must remain."

Despite this appeal Nina started to leave the room; the sight maddened Percy Loring. "I only stopped to ask if there was anything I could do. I didn't know how serious her illness might be."

Percy Loring's hands twitched, his eyes clung to the face that so stirred and baffled him. It was the first time in his life that hurt vanity had not served instantly to cool infatuation. "Nothing at all, a slight cold. Fair exaggerated."

"I am glad of that." She reached the threshold, but Percy Loring had seized her hand. He endeavored to speak playfully.

"I shall not let you go, beautiful countess —"

She drew her hand from his. "Really, Mr. Loring —"

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He closed the door and turned with his back against it, facing her. "I shall not let you go," he said. He was breathing hard. His simulation of playfulness, ponderous at best, became grotesque under the influence of his ill-concealed agitation.

For a moment she stood looking at him. "Don't you realize that you are making yourself very objectionable? In some way, through some curious provincial idea you have acquired of continental life — you have incredibly misunderstood me."

Color mounted to the roots of Percy Loring's thin hair. The veins came out on his forehead. Her words burned like acid upon his self-esteem, but the acid did not extinguish the flame. "I don't misunderstand the look in your eyes. That is a thing no man misunderstands. You have challenged me long enough."

Her faint smile was not soothing. "You have a vivid imagination, Mr. Loring. I understand your gift for fiction —"

"A woman who has the courage to express the opinions you did to me the first time we met, has the courage to live up to them. You can't fool me, Nina —" In his excitement Percy's language became curiously unliterary.

She gave him a composed glance. "Open that door." She spoke without emphasis. But the look in her face maddened Percy Loring. Things began to swim before his eyes. The thought crossed his mind that this excitement, this anger, were bad for him, but he was powerless against the rising flood.

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"You know well enough what I mean — you can take the consequences — blowing hot and cold with me. I am not the kind of man — I won't sit back and take it quietly —"

He lunged toward her but she evaded him. For a moment the freezing scorn in her eyes restrained him.

"You are more despicable than I imagined! How long do you expect to keep on living this lie with poor trusting little Mildred?"

Percy Loring's eyes glittered. "Lying isn't a pretty word. In America ladies do not use it, but I will forgive you anything when you look like that —"

Nina considered him curiously. "I wonder how, with your fear of public opinion — you dare let yourself go like this."

"So that is your tack, my lady! But I have you there — public opinion is something that women have greater need to fear — I'll show you —"

The muscles of his jaw worked uncontrollably. She watched him curiously without fear. "How long do you think I will continue to shield you for Mildred's sake? Certainly other women will not. I have, because I love her."

"You beautiful fiend!" cried Percy Loring, relapsing at last into the complete idiom of melodrama, "I'll conquer you — I'll show you — I'll —"

Again he attempted to seize her, but she slipped from his grasp and stood opposite him, the desk between

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them, yet with no effect of being at bay, no fear or even agitation showing in her face, only cold contempt.

"Now I am near the bell," she said quietly. "If necessary I will ring it. I hope you will come to your senses so that I will not be obliged to take such measures. But if you continue to annoy me in this fashion I warn you that I will tell Mildred everything. I had intended to let her believe in you as long as she could. But I will not endure this vulgar persecution any longer. You are too impossible —"

An impulse of his normal consciousness — the abnormal fear of an eavesdropper — temporarily returned to Percy Loring.

"Hush, hush," he cried, although the contessa's tones were of the lowest, "if someone should hear —"

"I will tell her of the trouble I had with you the night you drove me home from the golf club even in the presence of my child," Nina Varesca continued.

Percy Loring's head was swimming, but the reaction of malice upon wounded vanity was instinctive; it acted mechanically now in response. "You had the opportunity to go with Griscom. You chose me. What was I to think!"

She gave him a slow glance and smiled. Dense, impenetrable as was his vanity, something in that look made the author writhe. It served for the moment to arrest the complex ferment in his veins. He stood

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momentarily silent, leaning against the door with dropped arms.

Nina's eyes swept him lightly. "Badly as I thought of you, you surprise me. No Italian ever misunderstood the innocence and freedom of an American girl as your morbid mind has misunderstood wholesome frankness of speech."

Percy Loring smiled in his turn, a shaken twisted smile. "The innocent American girl — that is different. You do not look out of your eyes like an inexperienced girl."

She regarded him with a certain dispassionate interest. "You are indeed a new type."

Balked, tormented, furious, Percy Loring stood shaking before her. Blind fires were ravaging him, consuming all his carefully inculcated inhibitions and restraints. With an impulsive passion fused in hatred he desired this woman. As fiercely he craved to humiliate her. His breath began to strangle him. His words, half choked, stumbled on his tongue.

"You shall pay, you shall pay, looking at me like that, standing there —" he grew incoherent. With a quick movement he seized her, a grip of iron. She would not have believed he was so strong. Yet loathing of his clasp it seemed gave her strength to evade his attempted kisses.

"Let me go — how dare you —"

Suddenly the door opened. Percy moved quickly to release her, but not quickly enough. To the two who stood upon the threshold she was revealed escaping from

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his arms. In that second the thought of Mildred shot through Nina's mind, but it was not Mildred alone who had entered. Varesca was with her.

A moment Mildred stood motionless, her eyes upon her husband, then with a smothered cry she turned and fled up the stairs to her room. The count entered the library and shut the door behind him.

"You are here, then!" he said.

Percy Loring sought to recover himself. The temporarily shattered instinct of self-preservation stirred within him. The thought of Mildred buzzed confusingly in his brain, but he dismissed it. He could explain to Mildred. She would not blame him. He contrived to smile after a fashion. "He knows you!" he said to Nina.

The Italian turned upon him. "On the contrary I know *you*. You will explain to me later." And under that look Percy Loring's blood ran cold.

"There is nothing to explain. Your wife came here to see me, as you observed."

The count, considering his Southern blood, spoke calmly. "Mr. Loring, you are a cad."

Percy started as if struck. "You immoral Italian, insulting an American gentleman in his own home! I don't believe you are a count —"

Delia outside the door stood entranced, for Percy Loring's high flat tones had risen.

Under the influence of the other man's vulgarity the count's excitement cooled. He spoke almost as quietly as

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his wife had done. "We will discuss it later. It is not for this moment."

"Evidently you don't know how your wife spends her time when you are away — writing letters to men — telling them she is alone, asking them to call —" Percy Loring, unbalanced by the lashing of conflicting fires, had for the moment quite lost his head.

"You lie," said the count.

"Ask her — ask her, and see." Percy Loring's utterance became choked. "A letter to a lover — I saw it . . . telling him you were away — she cannot deny —" Percy Loring smiled with unsteady lips that moved without his volition. "So you see — you can't hold me responsible. You see I am only one of —"

The count stood staring a full moment without moving a muscle. Then he raised his arm and struck Percy Loring in the face with his glove. "You lie, you are a coward," he said. "A woman like Countess Varesca does not waste a glance of her eyes upon an old satyr like you. Do you believe for one moment that you can make me suspect her? I followed her here to give her my protection."

Percy Loring laughed hysterically. "Leave my house, I beg of you. We are not used to such loud scenes. Remember you are in a gentleman's house."

The count made answer with complete formality. "The contessa was obviously in all haste to leave when I entered. Now that I have come she is able to do so."

He opened the door, almost upsetting the unprepared

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Delia on the other side, and followed his wife out of the room.

Percy Loring fell back in his chair breathing hard. He passed his hand over his damp brow. These experiences were aging. He must be careful — bad for the heart — too.

He rose, poured out some sherry with a shaking hand and sank back in the chair, closing his eyes.

In the cab Mario buried his face in his hands without speaking. Nina laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, but he shook it off. Suddenly he turned, taking both of her arms in a tense grasp.

"Look at me," he commanded her. "Tell me the truth."

"Mario dear, I thought you really understood."

"Tell me the whole truth —"

"Have I ever told you anything but the truth —"

"How do I know? You are a woman."

He looked steadily into her eyes, she met them fearlessly.

"And you are an Italian," she said sadly, "you can't understand."

She felt the hands that held her arms shake. The sweat gathered on his brow. He released her and resting his elbow on his knees buried his face in his hands.

"Mr. Loring read a letter he found torn in my scrap basket," she said, "and made up a story about it which he told Mildred to save himself from disagreeable consequences. She had discovered that he had been coming to

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call on me alone. I did not see him but he continued to come."

"A letter to him?" He looked up at her with glazed eyes.

"No, no, Mario — of course not. A letter to Mr. Griscom."

"Griscom —" he repeated the name dully. But the fact of that unsent letter to Griscom, the one act that constituted her self-reproach, was not the thing that possessed his thoughts. It was the tormenting picture he had just seen that, it seemed, flashed again before his mind's eye.

"You were in his arms — I saw his face —"

"Then you must have seen how I was struggling to escape."

"He kissed you!"

"He tried to." A savage exclamation escaped him.

"Mario, he is unspeakable, I loathe him, I despise him, you know that."

"One never knows the ways of woman and love —" he repeated his Italian creed as an Arab might quote a fatalistic sentence from his Koran.

"Look at me, answer me. Do you love any other man more than you do me?"

"Mario, you know how I have loved you. You know I have been true to you. That is more than you can say to me."

He stared at her, his eyes a slumbering flame.

"You have always been true to me; *Dio*, what do you mean by that — you are keeping something back. You

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mean that you have been true to me in deed but that you do love some other man, in the way that you no longer love me! This man or some other man that I do not even know perhaps. I believe I have always known it would happen. That letter that you wrote —” It came back to him now.

“It was nothing, I have told you all there is about it. I wrote to Mr. Griscom but I didn’t send it. I was lonely. You were away — Mr. Loring got up to the apartment unannounced and found it in my scrap basket. I didn’t see him or Mr. Griscom or anyone.”

“Mr. Griscom — what do I care about Mr. Griscom! He is your real American — nothing but head — affairs — work.” The Italian repeated the last word viciously as if he bit it. “What are women to a man like that — a human machine, without blood in his veins. I do not believe that letter was to Griscom. You say it to cover the truth. It was to him — to Percy Loring, a man who desires women. That poem of his — did it not tell how he loved? You write asking him to come — his wife accuses you. I heard her. I find you in his arms. It is too much. I am not deaf and dumb and blind — *capisco — capisco!* At last I understand —”

She let the storm rage, but when he paused breathless she said quietly, “It is all as I have told you, Mario. I despise him. I have been true to you.”

He put his hand on the cab door. Apprehension began to seize her. “Mario, what are you going to do?”

“To leave you —”

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"Where are you going? Mario, don't leave me now, don't leave me . . . I need you."

He turned quickly. "You love me?"

"You know it."

He stared into her eyes as if he would pierce her innermost heart; for the first time they dropped before his. He smiled then and shook his head.

"I do not call that love," he said. He put his head out of the window and commanded the driver to stop. He turned to her. "Don't wait for me. I shall not be home to dinner."

"Mario dear, don't do anything foolish. I do love you — I do need you, Mario. I will wait for you to come back. Come soon — please —"

He was on the pavement now and stood a moment looking at her through the open cab window, a long look that, used as she was to his impulses, his violences, for an instant struck terror into her heart.

"*A rivederci, bellissima,*" he said and smiled a strange smile not like Mario.

Then he gave her address to the driver and was gone.

CHAPTER XXX

After the reading of that letter Mildred had gone into the street following the mere blind impulse to escape. She had walked for hours — how long or where she did not know. There might be some explanation. Unreasoning hope struggled to assert itself against the evidence of her senses, to be in its turn extinguished by the memory of incidents, words and glances that now seemed only too clear a confirmation of the meaning of this nightmare letter. That day at the golf club, Percy's manner with Nina, the discrepancies in his stories, a thousand things apparently unnoted and unrecorded at the time came back to her. Undecided as to whether she should pack a bag and go away somewhere temporarily, or face her husband with the facts, she finally turned toward home.

At the door she found Varesca endeavoring to cope with Delia, who was insisting that no one was at home. Even to Mildred's perceptions he was bearing the traces of agitation although he made an attempt to recover his ceremonious gaiety at her approach.

"The signora arrives in time to assist me. I — I have called for Nina under the impression that she is here —" he looked closely in her face, "but I am told that no one is at home."

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Mildred, plainly embarrassed by the contretemps — a fact not minimized in the suspicious inferences of the Italian,— rose to the necessities of the occasion with an effort.

“If Nina is here, she must be upstairs in the library. Won't you come up with me? Perhaps Delia did not understand.”

Perhaps she had wronged Percy — that thought recurred to her. It was easier to think ill of Nina, shocking as that was, easier to think of her as the pursuer than as the pursued. She passed quickly up the stairs. The library door was closed, but some instinct urged her to open the door without knocking. Delia, an interested observer from below, mounted the stairs after they had entered in time to see her mistress stand a moment, then turn and rush out again, while the count entered the room, closing the door behind him.

Delia was ecstatic. She had been several times on the point of leaving her situation, so she informed the cook, to go “where there was something doing.”

The count and his wife had reappeared first, and in her hurried flight at their appearance Delia had missed the second departure of her mistress. The library door had remained closed and Delia's natural fear of the dominant sex had restrained her from further investigation. The keyhole not giving satisfactory results she returned with a grotesque mixture of circumstance, speculation and invention to the kitchen.

Mildred had gone desperately into the street again, only

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conscious that she could no longer remain under the same roof with Percy Loring. Shrinking from the glances of the people she met, she took a cab; then uncontrollably restless under the pressure of the fact now forcing admittance to her mind, she got out, dismissed the man near an entrance to the park and began to walk. She forgot that she had had no lunch. It was after three o'clock. But she was not conscious of time. She had not thought beyond that one thing, unthinkable but irrefutable,— she had been deceived in Percy! He was the very loathsome opposite of her "ideal" of him. These things that she could never have even imagined had been going on. He had been living a hideous daily lie with her, and Nina had not, could not, have encouraged him. She had seen all too clearly the struggle, the loathing in her face.

Suddenly about a turn in the path she came face to face with Willard Wright who greeted her blithely, then noting her strange look, asked with swift concern if she were not well. She murmured confusedly, that she had a headache . . . and had come out for some fresh air.

"Have some tea," he urged her. "That's the best thing for a headache. We are right near the Casino. There won't be anyone there so early."

And from sheer lack of ability to frame an excuse she let him persuade her into the restaurant.

It was while they were drinking their tea and eating their crumpets that he exclaimed, "Now at last I have a chance to tell you that yarn I promised you — about how

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Mr. Loring's book changed my life — positively it did change the whole current of my life, you know."

"Oh, not now!"

Her quick, sharp rejection surprised him.

"Why not?" he asked a little blankly.

"I am so stupid with my headache," she stammered.

Mildred was not resourceful in evasion even in her normal state of mind. At the present moment she was utterly unable to turn aside the subject she dreaded, and when Willard Wright robustly insisted, "Oh, I guess you're well enough to take in anything about Mr. Loring, all right!" she had no further excuse to offer.

Willard ordered ices and cakes and unaware of the promenading waiter — restless with anxiety to receive his tip and speed them on their way — he leaned back at ease and told his story in all the simplicity of his naïve young egoism.

"I dare-say I seem like a green kid compared to a man like Loring, but I wasn't quite born yesterday. I've had to take my medicine — and I didn't like the taste of it much either. I fell in love with a girl in Chicago there — and she wasn't the real thing. I got on to the fact that she was only playing me, and by way of pulling out from under I got gay. I drank too much, got suspended at college. The governor cut down my allowance. I didn't worry, I began getting things charged. I am shocking you, Mrs. Loring, but I want to tell the whole yarn straight — I didn't care whether I went home nights or not, and I was on the down track if ever a fool

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kid was. One day I sat down on a bench in Lincoln Park and I happened to see that book of his — 'The Home of the Heart' — lying there on the bench beside me. Someone had left it. I picked it up and opened it. The scene was laid in Arizona, that's where my mother came from, and the first page was so beautiful I read on. When I came to the description of the girl she was so different from Amy I could read it without seeing her in it, like I did in most books, and I read on. You see I had put that girl up on a pedestal and she fell down hard. She was just one of the kind that soak college boys and don't care about anything but what they get out of it. But she had fluffy yellow hair and innocent blue eyes and I was just kid enough to feel, when I found her out, that there weren't any good women in the world. And that meant to me that there wasn't anything to look up to any more. Then as I read that book I thought: one man believes in the goodness of women — and I knew he wasn't young, I had seen his pictures. I thought, that man has lived twice, maybe three times as long as I have in this world, and he knows a whole lot about women, yet he writes of them as if they were angels. Well, I finished the book and I made up my mind that I had been a chump, and I pulled straight and I have stayed so ever since. And if I have won out in the game I guess he more'n half did it. And since I have known you I have understood even better for I can see that that woman in his book that seemed half angel — that woman was you."

He looked straight at her with his ingenuous boyish

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eyes, devoted, not in the least lover-like, utterly transparent and sincere.

"No, no," her tone was strange and hurried. "That book was written before I met Mr. Loring."

"Is that straight? Then it was prophecy all right. But you know all his women are sort of like that one — that's a funny thing. I read all his books afterwards, and when I had met you I understood or thought I did — how it happened. I thought it was because he had patterned them all on you. They are all that gentle, pure sort of type with large eyes. Anyhow — there are mighty few of us that deserve to so much as touch a good woman. There are not many Percy Loring in this world."

His face aglow with his young enthusiasm, Willard Wright beckoned the uneasy waiter who now stood frowning upon them from a distance, and settled his account with a tip upon the Western scale which served to inject a tinge of alacrity into the final attentions of the unworthy recipient.

"Well," Mildred's cheerful companion questioned her, "don't you like my story? I can't see through that thick veil you've pulled down, but I know you do, all right."

"The light," Mildred prevaricated, "hurts my eyes. It — it is a wonderful story."

"I thought you'd like it. Well, I guess this is where we pick up a cab and run for home base, isn't it? You aren't well enough to walk."

"I — I don't think I will go home just yet," Mildred

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temporized uncertainly. "I am going to see a friend."

"No, you are not," Willard Wright contradicted her with the authority of the protective male. "You're pretty nearly all in as it is, and I'm going to take you straight home." And while Willard Wright's kindly, slangy chatter ran on like a cheerful monotonous brook, Mildred tried to think what she should do.

She could not see Percy again, not now. Where could she go? To her aunts,— but they would not understand, they would ask questions impossible to answer just now. Not to Nina — she hadn't the right. Not to Fair nor to comfortable Edith Wickham. To Jane Worthing, yes, she knew it now with some new intuitive understanding. She could go to Jane Worthing. Jane would understand. But how to get rid of this amiable sympathetic companion bent upon accompanying her home. She must go through the pretence, let him leave her at her door at least. Percy was usually out at this time taking his afternoon constitutional. She could slip in, pack some things — she would have to do that some time, and get out before he returned.

They found a solitary taxicab waiting outside the restaurant and in another minute were half way home. How strange it was, that story of Willard Wright's. Mildred's simple mind, untrained in philosophizing, struggled with the problem. A lie was a terrible thing. To be a hypocrite, to be what Percy Loring was, was a hideous black incredible thing. It was like a bad dream that one must awaken from, yet she knew she would not

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wake up. And yet this man had done good, influenced other lives through his books. He was reckoned an influence for good in the world. How could such things be?

"Mr. Wright," she said suddenly in the midst of an anecdote he was relating, "do you think that anything in this world can make deception seem right?"

Willard, even more unused to abstract speculation than she, looked bewildered for a moment. "You hear about lies that save people's lives and all that," he said at last. "Fellows think it is all right to lie to keep a girl out of a scrape. I guess it's all right enough sometimes to protect someone from something."

But a swift revulsion swept over her. "No, no, it isn't, it can't be — I'm sure. Nothing, nothing can make lies — a whole life of lies — seem right."

Willard Wright stared, startled but not curious, only kind. "You poor little girl. Something has got you badly rattled. You oughtn't to have come out to-day."

They had reached her familiar door. She shuddered at the sight. Willard Wright waited with her until the door opened. It was Anna, the Swedish housemaid, who answered the bell. Mildred was grateful for that, for she dreaded Delia's inquisitive eyes.

"Won't you come in?" She did not know how to evade the courteous form, and to her consternation Willard Wright replied,

"Sure, I'm going to see you inside! Can't shake me

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till I see you in safe hands," and followed her into the hall.

Anna waited to inform her that Mr. Loring was out but would be back very soon and was very anxious to see her.

She would have time then to get some things together and escape perhaps before his return. But even as the momentary relief swept over her she heard the outside bell ring. With an instinctive impulse to escape she slipped into the reception room, Willard Wright behind her.

"Well, I guess you're safe now," he remarked with outstretched hand. "I'll call up later and ask how you are. And I'm coming around soon for a regular talk-fest."

Percy Loring entered on the last sentence. "Well, so you are back at last," he addressed his wife. His smile was small and chilly.

"Yes, sir, and she never ought to have gone out at all," Willard Wright informed him with his directness. "She's got an awful headache, she's really sick with it."

"I am sorry for that. But it's a mistake to take one's small pains too seriously — a little Christian Science isn't such a bad thing. What — going as I come?" He gave Willard a sharp glance with the last words. It didn't seem like Mr. Loring, the boy thought afterwards.

"I was going before you came." Willard turned his soft hat about in his hands.

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"Well, well, come before I go next time."

The boy gave the older man's hand a grip that made him wince. "I sure will. Thank you. Goodby, sir." When he had gone, Percy turned and closed the door.

"Absurd, raw young puppy calling me 'sir' as if I were his father!" Then he saw that his wife was moving toward the door. "And I don't at all like the idea of your having these engagements with young men, staying out to lunch and making a secret of your plans. This is something new for you. I am afraid you have been taking lessons from your cousin."

Mildred, without answering, continued to walk away from him, but her husband, with a quick flash in his eyes, closed the door, retaining his hold upon the knob.

"Please — I am going out," said Mildred. Her tone was uneven but neither timid nor appealing. Her husband detected the new note and stared incredulously. Was this his adoring Mildred?

"May I enquire," he framed his question with elaborate courtesy, "where you are going?"

She answered then quite steadily although without meeting his eyes. "Out of your house."

Percy Loring's breath escaped in an exclamation. "Are you out of your senses?"

She did not answer, and in the silence which followed, Percy Loring's color rose. "I see you are jealous about that little call of Nina's. That bogus count has been filling you up with his lies." Percy became almost agriculturally naïve in his wrath.

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"I have not discussed the matter with the count. The only lies that have been told me were yours."

Percy gave a violent start. His hand went out seeking support and found a chair back. He gripped it till his nails showed white.

"You seem to forget the scene I interrupted a few hours ago. I understand about Nina now. But perhaps you do not know that—the letter you handed me this morning was—was not the one you intended me to see."

The chair gave slightly under Percy's weight. He recovered his balance but not his tone as he answered, "My dear girl, you know I get all sorts of foolish letters from women."

"That letter was—very clearly—an answer to one of yours. The writer is—known to me. She has even—been in our house—" Suddenly a paroxysm of revulsion seized her and she put her hands before her eyes. "Oh, it's no use, Percy, it's no use, let me pass."

"You are a spoiled, wilful child. I can easily explain this letter—" For the moment fright gave place to anger; Percy's tone rose.

"I've no doubt of that."

"How dare you speak to me like that? Is this my wife?" Percy apostrophized space with apoplectic eyes. Mildred cried out, "Oh, *don't* . . . Let me go."

"I thought you loved me."

"I did."

"*Did!*"

She was suddenly calm again. "Will you please move

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so that I can leave the room? If you don't I will ring for the servants."

For the second time this day was this scene enacted with the author as leading man.

"Mildred, dear," Percy suddenly assumed a different tone. "Sit down, calm yourself. You know in your heart how I love and honor you."

"Never say that to me again!"

"You know how a man in my position must be the object of pursuit by women —"

She turned toward the electric bell.

"Stop," he cried, really alarmed then. "I can't have a scandal like this. You have *got* to stay with me whether you want to or not."

Was it Mildred who met his eyes calmly and said, "How are you going to make me stay?"

Percy's arms dropped at his sides. After all she held the trumps. He dropped into a chair with a wildly beating heart. For the second time today he suffered injurious excitement through the perversities of woman.

"You will be glad enough to come quietly back tomorrow," he said at last. "Your position will not be any too enviable. Nobody will believe you against me."

"Possibly not," she replied; "in any case I shall say nothing to defend myself to the world, so long as you leave me in peace. You are safe so far as I am concerned."

A moment later he heard the door close behind her.

CHAPTER XXXI

Mario did not come back that night. Nina rose early after having lain awake till dawn. A nameless oppression possessed her. The morning mail was brought in with her coffee, but there was no word from him.

She went out to do some shopping and at lunch-time, dreading to return to the empty apartment, telephoned to the hotel to inquire if the count had returned. Her heart sank at the clerk's negative reply. Yet why — this thing had happened so often before, there was no cause for alarm.

Since her idealistic young conception of Mario had given place to the recognition that his was the simpler type, she had become accustomed to the thought that the adaptation, the understanding, were all on her side. Mario, she knew, could only interpret her in the terms of his own emotional reactions; while to her he had been a keyboard of whose simple range she had had almost complete command, knowing that touching a certain note would quite invariably draw out a certain response. But of late doubt had assailed her. It was not only that she no longer condescended to manipulate the keyboard as she once had done. Was it possible that there was some drama going on beneath the surface in Mario's soul that

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she with her fundamentally different psychology could not fully understand? Had she met there in the hidden place of souls, some deeper thing of which his instinctive recognition of the change in her was but the visible surface portion?

Not wishing to meet anyone she knew she went to a quiet tea room in the shopping district for lunch instead of to the fashionable woman's club where she had been "put up" for the term of her stay. Her undefined apprehension formed itself into a sense of uneasiness about Paolo. After a short struggle with herself she decided to send for him to come back. She went to the telephone which was in a crowded corner of the little place, and after a long wait managed to get her uncle at the other end.

The connection was bad and his voice sounded indistinct and far away. She caught the word accident, however, and her heart almost seemed to stop beating for a moment. Then reassurance followed in fragments.

"Nothing serious. Small explosion — power house . . . trains held up. Everything late . . . better tomorrow."

She remembered now seeing some head lines about delayed trains in an evening paper. She felt — absurdly, she told herself — that she must see her child that instant. She could go out there herself, of course. Yet if there were likely to be delays in the journey — she did not want at this critical moment to be away if Mario should return.

She was in no mood for further shopping. Her mind

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refused to work along lines of choice and discrimination. No, she must not go away now. Paolo was in safe hands. Casting about in her mind for some way to annihilate the hours she remembered Jane Worthing, and the next instant with a sense of shock at her own forgetfulness recalled that Jane was to sail upon her mission of service in two days.

She telephoned for a cab. When it came she recognized the undersized chauffeur as of the type that she particularly disliked. With few exceptions the public chauffeurs of New York seemed to her to fall into two classes,— the reckless-febrile and the incompetent-stolid. She had found one of the exceptions in a grave and skillful German with official manners who manipulated one of the hotel cabs. Regretting that she had not started out under August's safe espionage that day she accepted her fate and in a minute was being wildly whirled about corners and between vehicles in frequent violation of the minor traffic regulations.

At a crossing they grazed a man. With a little shock of recognition she saw that the man was Griscom. She gave the chauffeur a quick order to halt, and Griscom, discovering her in the same instant, came to the curb to speak to her. The car had turned a corner into a quiet side street in the fifties where there was little traffic.

"Did you stop to apologize for not running over me?" he asked.

She gave him her hand. "This chauffeur is appar-

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ently suffering from homicidal mania. But you seem to be unscathed."

"It was my fault this time. I don't often go to sleep on corners." His eyes searched her. She was conscious of something tense, disturbed, in his atmosphere. It came to her as it had before how utterly the events and interests of his life were away from hers. A sudden longing seized her to blot out those other unknown absorbing things, to bring back for a moment that lover's look in his eyes, to feel again her strength that was his weakness. The next instant with sharp self-scorn she thrust back the thought. How contemptible a thing she was beside that honorable strength of his! How weak and wrong to want to break it down. Was she indeed so injured to the Latin's emotional habit of love that she was unfit to appreciate this stronger ideal of renunciation and service? She dropped her eyes, controlling the impulse to question him, even in light and superficial fashion.

"How are you? How are things going with you?" His strong protective sense reached out toward her. "Is anything the matter? You are not looking awfully fit to-day."

"Having nothing better to do I have been worrying," she admitted.

"About anything I can help?"

She looked away from him. "I am afraid not. I have been indulging in an attack of maternal folly about Paolo. You know I left him at Uncle Wilfrid's to get

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She held the child close, something more than the maternal emotion beating in her heart. "He is indeed good to us, *piccino*. And he would not come in?" Paolo shook his head. She drew him over to her chair by the window and took him in her lap. "Tell me all about it, *tesoro mio*. Father is away. We will have supper together to-night."

CHAPTER XXXII

At a Spring exhibition of the younger painters she met Maddox the next morning. He had a catalogue in his hand, upon the margin of which he was making notes. His smooth brow was corrugated with an important frown. In the moment of recognizing the countess he hurried up to greet her.

"You find me at work," he remarked.

"It seems like a peaceful receptive occupation — writing about pictures."

Maddox looked dissatisfied. "Pretty slow — this thinking of something to say about each one because the chap's your friend — trying to keep square with them all and yet not be accused of indiscriminating praise. I tell you I envy Griscom — off to the Dardanelles. May blow up on the way, of course. But at least there is something doing while you're alive."

She looked at his comfortable undistinguished face — it was not of an adventurous type — then through her passing amusement a thought struck with the sharpness of a knife thrust.

"You don't mean that he is going right away — that the day is set —"

Maddox sighed enviously. "Yes, off for glory and

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adventure. And I'm here reeling off jargon about values, brush work, *chiura scura* —"

The countess fixed a concentrated attention upon a smoky landscape. "Off, you say? He isn't gone He was here yesterday."

Maddox nodded. "Yes, but he won't be tomorrow! He got his papers yesterday,—passports, proofs of ancient and honorable Americanism. Didn't you see the morning paper? They're beginning to get in their deadly work down there now."

The countess continued to stare at the grey-blue canvas, and Maddox, glancing at her for response, wondered what held her attention in the pretentious little picture which was of the type that attempts to cover ignorance of the basic principles of art with an effect of misty mystery. He continued his narrative, for Griscom as a subject had the fascination for Maddox that the doings of the big man have for the small.

"He didn't know till yesterday noon. Then he had some business or other out of town. I know he went somewhere in his machine, in the afternoon, and had to work all night. He only has today to get ready in. Boat sails tomorrow morning. That's the way with our work: 'Maddox, I'd like you to go to China this afternoon.'—'All right, chief.' Crowded hour all right, but it's life," Maddox concluded with a sigh.

Then he pointed out a large canvas. "There's one of our promising young American portrait painters. What do you think of that?"

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Compelled by the direct question of his round eyes she answered at random, "This one? But no; it is a Swedish name."

"Sure; a Swedish emigrant's son. But we call 'em all American after we have given them their art training," Maddox grinned. "Most of these chaps are hyphenates. They are the ones whose parents can afford to let them be students nowadays. Erickson's a great swell in the art world now." Maddox was embarked upon a descriptive monologue, but he discovered that the countess was taking leave of him.

She had left him a little abruptly, Maddox resentfully reflected. "Those girls that buy titles think they can put on airs. Seemed to have something on her mind — debts, no doubt. That titled bunch were always in a financial hole." Thus Maddox consoled himself, on his way back to the office.

As the dignified occupation of art critic was not alone sufficient to maintain a proper standard of life in the metropolis, Maddox wrote in addition other contributions for the same sheet, technically known as "stories," which seemed to him full of personality and color. These varied from a lament upon the passing of an "old landmark" aged twenty years or so, described in phraseology appropriate to the mediæval remains of Europe, to a crisp "racy" account of the latest disaster. Therefore, comfortably free from the correct English tweed coat in which he had encountered the countess, Maddox sat down before his typewriter to indite a sprightly account of what

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he called "An auto spill." The accident had maimed three people for life, but Maddox's account read like the description of the amusing blunders of a farce. His style was one of his paper's most valuable assets.

Nina Varesca went out in the street. Just one thing was clear in her mind. She must see him before he left, just once she must see him. An uptown Fifth Avenue bus stood at the corner and she got in. She scarcely noticed the crowding elbows and careless jostlings. She got off at her corner, then reflecting that it was the sympathetic habit of the telephone girl to share the joys and sorrows of the hotel guests, she turned down a side street toward a drug-store which contained a public station. Obligated to wait for a vacant booth, she strove to control her rising panic during the long moments of enforced inaction. He had promised to let her know — he would not go without seeing her again, and yet — to-morrow, Maddox had said. And in all that pressure of haste he had taken time, three hours or more, to gratify her desire to see her child. She knotted together hands that shook. In one compartment an angry Irishman roared an incoherent grievance into an apparently official ear. She could see his red face through the glass. In the next a squat dark-skinned girl was talking at the top of an extraordinarily strong voice. In a third three Jewish girls were crowded in a composite communication.

The irate Irishman was the first to emerge, not too irate to apologize for brushing her, and Nina quickly took his place. The booth reeked with the odor of the late

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occupant's pipe. She gave Griscom's number and waited.

"*Listen, Mamie.*" The girl's voice came from the next booth, lingering on the *s* in the East Side fashion. "Come along now. *Why* wontchu come? I *tole* him we'd go to the *s-show* wid him tonight —" The telephone boy at Griscom's apartment answered at that point, but only to say that Mr. Griscom was not there, he thought he was "down at the office." She looked up the number of the weekly whose representative he was to be, dropped in her nickel and waited. "*Listen, Mamie, why* wontchu come —" the girl's voice reiterating monotonously and placidly came from the next booth. Then she heard a voice in the receiver, a female voice. The girl couldn't understand her name, even after she had repeatedly spelled it, but after a short argument she agreed to call Mr. Griscom. Another voice came from the booth on her other side as she waited again,— the complaining tone of the New York street boy, "Aw, *cut* it out, will you, I never tole you that . . . *All* right, it's up to you then. Sure — aw, *what's* de matter wid you . . ." Then with a leap of the heart she heard Griscom's voice. He had come to the telephone without knowing who was at the other end, she knew by his tone, quiet, slightly imperative, without discourtesy — a tone that changed quickly at the sound of her name.

"I was just trying to get you," he told her.

"To tell me you hadn't time to say goodbye —"

"To ask when I might come."

"At any time, at your convenience . . . naturally."

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"About half past five — six?"

"If you want to change the hour, don't hesitate. I shall be home all afternoon —"

He thanked her. "But I shall not change it," and hung up the receiver.

It was only half past one. She had the afternoon before her, four hours at least, an endless waste of waiting before she could see him . . . for the last time perhaps. Suppose he could not come. Something might prevent — such work was like a soldier's orders. He would put duty before her, she knew that. No, no, but she *must* see him — she must — she couldn't bear it if she did not. She sent Paolo out with Assunta. She prayed that Mario would not return. She must have this hour, this moment alone with him before he went. She paced the room striving with her characteristic habit of control to be reasonable, to school herself to act as she would wish afterwards to have acted.

The telephone bell rang sharply and her heart leapt with a shock that seemed to take all her breath. It was to tell her that he could not come . . . to postpone it. She thought only of him. She had forgotten Mario. She took up the receiver with a hand that shook uncontrollably. The hotel clerk announced "Mrs. Loring" through the telephone. "*Mrs. Loring?*" she emphasized the title interrogatively to be quite sure. Receiving assurance in the clerk's repetition she said, "Tell her to come up." It would be over an hour before Griscom could come. To talk to someone would help to keep her

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sane, perhaps. Then she wondered indifferently why Mildred was coming. For the moment the episode in the author's library had been blotted from her mind, but when she saw her cousin's face she remembered it. Mildred came up and took her hands as she had not since their first meeting.

"Oh, Nina, dear Nina — can you ever forgive me!"

Nina drew her to a seat. "Forgive you, Mildred?"

"About Percy. You know I saw — I understand now — *everything*." Nina did not reply. Mildred's case, their estrangement, her bitter awakening, all seemed pale remote things to her now. Mildred, in a broken voice, continued her confession: "It wasn't only what I saw. It was a letter, too. . . . I can't tell you about it. He handed it to me by mistake that morning. I can never go back to him."

"Never? You may not keep on feeling that way. I have stayed with my husband. He has been unfaithful."

"He didn't lie to you every day of his life."

"He would have if I hadn't accepted the situation. He did at first until I removed the necessity by letting him live his life in his own way."

"But he is so terribly in love with you. Everyone can see it —"

"There is always one woman that such a man loves most. But he will have his little love adventures just the same."

"How hideous. I don't know how much Percy cares about other women — or for me. I don't know anything

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except that he has lied, lied, lied to me; that he isn't real and that I don't love him any more. The man I loved isn't even dead. He never was. It is like the wife in the 'Doll's House'—I have 'been married to a strange man.' I used to think that was just a horrid problem play. Now I understand."

With an effort Nina managed to detach herself to some extent from her own disturbed emotional undercurrent and focus upon her cousin's case.

"It is a hard moment for a woman when she has to face that knowledge, Milly, but it isn't a matter in which to take action hastily. Let me tell you about my own case. I was nineteen when I met Mario. His picturesque love-making turned my world upside-down. It was like living in a romance. He was mad about me for about six months after our marriage, then I saw him driving with an actress when I thought that he was in Milano. I thought it had killed me, but I did not die of a broken heart. I didn't even make any scene from the Italian standpoint—it not happening to be my nature to run to words when I am hurt. I simply withdrew from Mario and treated him with courtesy. Other men were amiable enough to admire me and Mario was soon beside himself with jealousy. We made up. I was too young to take an attitude. His mother had a frank talk with me. That was my first introduction to the continental standpoint. Well—shocking as it may seem to you, I took the attitude of the continental wife and accepted the situation. The next time Mario's fancy turned in other directions

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the blow did not fall so hard. The third time it scarcely gave me a twinge."

"And are all Italian husbands unfaithful?" exclaimed Mildred.

"Oh, no, not literally, but let us say potentially!" Nina smiled faintly. "Many Italian women keep their husbands in leading strings like children. But that situation seems to me quite impossible. A man who can be coerced into fidelity by watchfulness seems rather an undesirable object, does he not? That method never appealed to me."

"Yet you still love him!" Mildred marvelled. "I could not."

Nina turned aside. "I have a very great affection for Mario. He is like a lovable child. That springtime mirage of love was dispelled, of course, with my disillusionment, but it left me with no feeling of bitterness. On the contrary I look back to that period of my life as a most interesting experience. The Italians are artists in love-making, full of a certain kind of imagination and poetry. Their skies, their sunshine, their fragrant flowers, and their fragrant music, all weave into it. The phrases repeat themselves, it is true, but before it becomes too familiar it is very alluring. I believe all women have to meet some adjustment of their young ideals. The perfect experience must in any case be rare. We all of us expect too much of life at the start, Milly."

Mildred listened with almost painful attention to her cousin's words. Nina realized, difficult as it was to con-

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ceive of Percy Loring as an inspirer of romantic affection, that Mildred in her fashion was going through the experience, now as lifeless in her imagination as a pressed flower, that she had suffered seven years before.

"I don't just know how to express what I mean, Nina, but I think that there was not anything sordid in your disillusionment as there is in mine. It was—" Mildred turned away her face, "oh, Nina—it was that Madame La Vallière that first said she was a Greek, and then told you she was Turkish, and she was French after all, just as you said." Mildred recited the facts with complete unawareness of their possessing any aspect other than the serious one. "She had a lace business in France. Things hadn't gone very well with her since the war and she wanted money . . . evidently she had the right to demand it of him. . . . Oh, I can't talk about it—but it was such a *squalid* letter. I never liked her, but I thought his admiration for her was very superficial and he seemed to have lost interest in her altogether lately."

"That was probably when it began." Nina's calm diagnosis drew a shudder from Mildred.

"Nina, how can you speak of such things calmly like that? But you were right about her. Fair would have it that she was a milliner, and she said Edith Wickham thought she was a lady's maid, but you see they were both wrong." The situation plainly held no light of humor for poor Mildred. "Whatever she was, she is the instrument of my utter and complete disillusionment. I see Percy as he is at last,—a weak hypocrite, whose life is a

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complete contradiction of the ideals he talks about." Mildred relapsed into her bewildered misery. "I don't know where to go — what to do. If only father were alive!"

"Poor little Milly — stay with me."

"I ought not to stay in a hotel — people would know at once. I want to do it all as quietly as I can."

"Lie down in my room a little while and rest."

Mildred allowed her cousin to lead her into her bedroom, take off her hat and coat and draw down the shades. As she was leaving Mildred caught her hand.

"Nina, how could I ever have thought such a thing of you!"

"You loved Percy. It is easy to understand. You had to choose between us and naturally you believed him."

"I don't love him any more."

"Do you want me to stay and talk with you, dear, or would you rather be alone a little while?"

"I think I will just be quiet here for a while," Mildred decided. "I want to think. I was with Jane last night. She is going to sail to-morrow, but she let me stay. I didn't know who to go to. I was ashamed to come to you, and I would have had to make explanations to anyone else. Janie just left me alone. I haven't slept a wink for two nights. Yesterday I walked miles in the park trying to think. I met Willard Wright and he insisted upon talking about how Percy's books had reformed him — oh, Nina, at that moment —"

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"Poor little Milly, life has a way of mocking our tragic moments."

As Nina was at the door, her cousin's voice detained her. "Nina, do you think that makes any difference—that his books, Percy's books, have done good to some people?"

"In your judgment of him you mean? I don't know, dear. It means that the ideal he recognizes is good. And if in spite of his being a hypocrite in his individual life he can create an influence for good through his books, I suppose he is after all, a better member of society than the frank Lothario who has the courage of his vices. It is rather a twisted problem of good and evil. I wouldn't think about it now. Just try to relax and go to sleep."

She closed the door softly and went back to the reception room. She glanced at the clock. It was half past four; as she did so the telephone bell rang. Again the sound set all her pulses beating. But the voice at the other end, an indistinct one, inquired if Mrs. Loring was there. It was the Loring's chauffeur. Nina gathered from his incoherent sentences that an accident had happened to Mr. Loring.

"A serious accident?"

"Yes, ma'am, looks like it . . . doctor . . . here, and . . . nurse . . . attacked . . . lay in the woods . . . all night . . . and we can't find Mrs. Loring—"

"Mrs. Loring is here with me. I will tell her at once. Will you see if the doctor or the nurse can speak to me?"

She waited some time, then a collected feminine voice

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addressed her. "Mr. Loring's injuries do not seem to be serious," the nurse explained. "On the other hand, one could never tell. Mr. Loring had gone to the Beachcroft Country Club the night before to give a reading from 'The Home of the Heart,' and had taken a short cut through the woods to the station and had been attacked by some Italians, he thought. He had caught cold having been there some time before anyone found him, and was very nervous from the shock. He was most anxious that the thing shouldn't get in the papers, and he had been constantly asking for Mrs. Loring, who had gone away on a short visit. The shock had caused him to forget her address."

"I will tell her at once," Nina assured her.

She went to the bedroom and knocked lightly on the door and entered. She found Mildred lying upon the gay chintz-covered divan, with wide-open eyes.

"How long is it since you have been home, Mildred?"

"Not since day before yesterday afternoon."

"Chapman has just telephoned that Percy has been hurt. He went to Beachcroft yesterday and was attacked in the woods on his way home. They have been trying to find you."

Mildred stared at her dully "Do you mean that he is dead?"

"No."

"Will he die?"

"I don't believe so. I don't think he is seriously hurt from what the nurse said. But you had better go to him,

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her efforts became a little tremulous — “that it is something of a shock to see you actually sailing away.”

“It came so quickly at the last that I don’t quite realize it myself yet.”

She took a chair with her back to the window.

“Turkey seems rather far away,” she said, “although, if we go back, it will be nearer than America.” There was a strange note in her voice, she was conscious of it; he too, perhaps, for he glanced up quickly and rising from the seat he had taken went to the window and looked out.

“The world cannot put you farther away or bring you nearer,” he said at last.

She made a quick movement. “You were so good, so kind about Paolo yesterday.” She did not look at him. “How can I thank you — to take all that time — when you were so busy — just for a selfish whim of mine —”

“It was not a selfish whim.”

She contrived a ghost of her old smile then. “If you had considered it so, you would not have gratified it, oh, man of iron — is that it?”

“I am afraid I would have just the same. You see — I knew that I was going then.”

She rose with some pretense of adjusting the curtain. “And you had to work all night to make up for it — I know. I can’t bear to think of it. You mustn’t do things like that, Dan —” She broke off, unable to command coherent utterance. She pressed the back of her hand to her lips.

She had called him by his first name. He gave her a

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startled glance. She mastered herself with an effort. "Why are we standing like this? I am not hospitable." She sat down. He took a chair opposite her.

"Habit, I suppose; I haven't sat down all day."

In the silence that fell between them the sound of voices outside calling "extras" came in the open window,—those strange cries, raucous, indistinguishable, chaotic, that carry with them the dread sense of disaster.

"They are calling the extras again," she was the first to speak. "I suppose it is nothing, but there is something terrifying about the sound."

He looked at her, and something in his face still further threatened her remnant of control. "Italy has entered the war," he said, "didn't you know?"

"At last — really? My poor Italy — I did not know." She sat silent a moment, then broke out with subdued passion, "And I, perhaps, shall stay here,— idle, useless. Mario may send for his mother and the baby now. You go, Jane goes . . . but I stay here in safety."

His face quivered. Her tone, so different from the one he knew, struck through his heart. "There is nothing ignoble in that safety. What could you do over there?"

"Nurse a few wounded boys back to life, give a little money here and there, and shelter to some poor refugee, perhaps."

"And be shot as a spy," Griscom concluded.

But his remark did not have the effect he had intended. She looked at him with wide eyes dark with a sudden fear.

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"That might happen to you perhaps," she whispered.

He looked away. "Possibly, but not probably. We journalists usually escape." He turned toward her, but without trusting himself to meet her eyes. "Remember your own boys," he said. "They are your work in the world."

"Oh, I do not forget them . . . my babies," she said. "What would my life be without them?" He looked at her then with startled eyes. "That is why it kills me not to be doing something — *anything* for the children of other mothers over there . . . mothers who have sent their sons out to fight and die."

"It seems as though the world were tumbling about one's ears," he said.

"Even in our protected lives here." She cast about for some less agitating topic, for she felt her defences giving way. "Mildred Loring has just left me. Did you know that her husband has been hurt?"

"Mr. Loring hurt? Some accident, you mean?" Griscom also welcomed any subject that might keep them on the surface of things.

"He was attacked in the Beachcroft woods. They didn't know how serious it might be. But I am sure it isn't. Men like Percy Loring don't die."

"Poor little Mildred," he said. "She is incredibly but sincerely fond of him. Do they know who did it?"

"He suspects some Italian desperadoes working in the neighborhood, I believe. The poor Italians — they seem to get the credit of most of the crimes committed here."

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"Italians more often kill for love or revenge than money, do they not?"

"It is an accepted fiction — I don't think they do many deeds of violence except in the South. To think that little Mildred should have married a man like that. He came to see me about every other day for a week, and told Mildred that I was pursuing him! He even read a letter he saw on my writing-desk — a letter I had written to you and never sent — and told Mildred and Mario about it, trying to prove his story —"

He interrupted her sharply. "A letter you had written to me?"

"Asking you to come and see me — one evening when I was alone and — unable to amuse myself."

"And you didn't send it — why?"

"I thought better of it."

"When was it?"

She looked down. "I think it was the evening after the night we heard *Bohème*."

He rose to his feet. "If I had only kept my head. . . . It is terrible to think of your wanting me and being afraid to send for me — because of that —"

"It wasn't you — because of anything *you* did — that I was afraid —"

She had risen also. She turned to him, the look in her face took away his breath. "Dan, you are going to-morrow," she began and stopped.

"To-morrow."

"And there is danger, isn't there — there must be —"

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"I suppose there is always a little."

"Sit down there," she indicated a chair, then seated herself with half the distance of the room between them.

"I want to tell you something before you go. Promise me not to come nearer or I can't say it . . . we may never see each other again . . . you promise —"

"I promise."

"I love you, Dan. I want you to know,— if you don't already.— I can't stand it to have you go away and not know —"

"Nina!" he rose to his feet, then sat down again breathing hard. The sound in his voice set her trembling.

"I suppose I began to love you in Switzerland without quite understanding it. It was so different from the way I had loved Mario. That is why I wouldn't drive home with you that day from the golf club. It was myself I could not trust — not you, Dan. . . . That is why I didn't send the letter. I was punished for my weakness in writing it. Mildred's injustice punished me — but it would have hurt me more afterwards if I had sent it — I want to keep my love for you above all weakness. Oh, Dan, I want this minute so terribly to take your head between my hands as if you were Paolo — and pray — pray that no harm will come to you. But I must not. Help me — don't come near me — it is the only way —"

He took a step toward her, then stood still.

"You ask almost more than I can stand. To hear you say such things and not to go near you — when my love for you is — choking me."

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She shut her eyes. "I must stay with Mario and the children — all my life I must stay with them; nothing, nothing can change me about that."

For one blinding instant their eyes met. "Oh, Nina Varesca," he cried, "just once — only once let me have you in my arms —"

She drew back in terror. "No, no, you mustn't touch me. You must keep your word, Dan."

For a moment they looked into each other's eyes and he saw her face with all its subtleties, its inhibitions of civilization swept away, the face of the real woman.

He stood before her with folded arms, his voice a whisper. "God, how I love you, Nina Varesca — how I love you — how I love you! I could take you in these two arms and crush the civilization out of you. . . . I could go mad, quite mad, with looking at you."

She stood in the center of the room, her dilated eyes upon his, all her love, her anguish of parting, full upon her lips, denying the denial in her words. "No, no; don't come any nearer. . . . I mustn't, Dan, I *mustn't* . . ."

But he had her in his arms, he had compelled her lips, her life was beating against his.

Even encompassed so, against his lips, she exerted all her will to withhold, a reed struggling to stand against the whirlwind, before she gave herself to that blinding surging madness that swept her breathless to some divine height of being where she ceased to exist save as some throbbing part of him.

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Two worlds had crashed together molten into one, flung out as it were madly through a limitless space. At last the love of a strong man drew her, held her, possessed her. Thought was drowned in a whirling vortex of sense and spirit, and in that fusion it seemed some subtle essence of the soul passed from each to each. Scarcely conscious of his hands, his arms, his lips, her whole being seemed to dissolve in his as in a great light.

Then after a nameless period a sound, remote but penetrating clove through consciousness. She moved faintly to withdraw herself from his arms that with hunger drew her back again. But even as she relaxed to their possessive touch the sound came again, more insistent or more realized . . . the ringing of a bell.

"Was it the telephone?" She looked up at him with eyes that fell again before that too-powerful light. Then the sound, continuous now, caused her senses to clear, impelling her to action. She drew back from him and took a mechanical step toward the door. She pressed her hands against her eyes. "Which bell—"

"I think it was the bell of the apartment," he answered in a strange voice.

She moved slowly toward the door, striving to gather together her scattered forces. Perhaps it was Mario.

How could she meet him at that moment? Could he not leave her this one half hour out of all her life? She waited shivering. Torn from that mastery and strength she felt an incomplete uncovered thing, deprived, exiled. Could he not have left them a little longer? "They two

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embracing under death's spread hand . . .” She heard Assunta's belated step in the hall, heard the opening and closing of the door. She turned and met his eyes an instant. He went to the window and looked into the darkening street, struggling to regain some self-command. In the center of the room Nina Varesca waited. She heard the door open and listened for her husband's familiar step, but did not hear it. Instead Assunta came to the door and stood tentatively on the threshold, a note on her tray.

“It is only a letter,” she addressed her mistress in Italian, “but it says to deliver immediately.”

“Bring it to me, Assunta.” She turned her face away from the girl's scrutiny as she took it from the tray. She looked at the envelope. It was addressed in Mario's writing. A short reprieve, then. She held it, remotely wondering if she should open it. News of his delayed return, or perhaps announcing it. She started to lay it aside, then some impulse urged her to open it. She pressed the button to turn on the light and broke open the envelope. There was a silence, then Griscom heard a smothered cry. He turned quickly.

“What is it?”

She was staring at the letter. “Mario — Mario — it can't be true —”

“What is it?” He moved toward her, but she raised her hand, warding him off, and sank into a chair still staring at the letter.

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“My boy, poor foolish boy — oh, it is not true, it is not true —” she repeated.

“Your husband,” he asked, “something has happened to him —”

“Something — He has — killed himself.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

He stared at her a moment with no expression on his face. "There must be some mistake —"

"There is no mistake. It is all here — here in this letter."

"But the letter is from him — Italians threaten — he may not have actually done it — something may have turned him aside at the last. You do not know that it has actually happened."

"He would not turn aside at the last. It would not be like him. He went out in a canoe on the Sound to make it seem an accident." She recited the facts in a low unnatural voice. "When he had gone that far he would not turn back. I know him." She covered her face with her hands. She was shaking from head to foot. He stood watching her in stunned silence. Suddenly she looked up, and he turned from the sight of her face. "Dan, I can trust you. I cannot bear it alone. . . . It was Mario that tried to kill Percy Loring. The suspicion crossed my mind but I thought it too impossible. But it was he. My poor foolish boy, he thought I cared for Percy Loring. Oh, I have tried, Dan — God knows I tried — to make him happy."

Her suffering pierced him with a two-edged sword. "Then you loved him after all," he said.

"Yes . . . I loved him — he was the father of my

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boys. He was my oldest child. You are not a woman — you can't understand."

"But he did not love you like a son."

"The poor boy, if he had only understood —"

He whitened. "Understood — that you loved him?"

"That I would have stayed with him; that he had nothing to fear."

His personal torment was too keen. He had to put her to the test even in that hour. "If what you have said was not mere passing emotion caused by my hopeless love for you, my going away, all that — he only made a mistake in the man. You *do* love someone else — or isn't it true — oh, God, you *do* love me — you do. . . . You lay within my very soul here — you touched the innermost recesses of my being — until the thought of losing you was stark madness —"

She looked with desolate eyes into his that devoured her. "If he had only understood that I would have stayed with him always, even loving you as you know I do, Dan, this terrible thing might not have happened."

He was ashamed then. "He couldn't have borne that. No man could."

"Couldn't he? A woman could."

"No; he is happier out of it."

She shook her head. "No, no — he loved life so — my poor boy. Please go, Dan."

He looked about distraught. "How can I leave you like this — there are things to be done. I can't let others do them now."

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But that implication of his right to serve could only hurt her in this hour. "No; someone else must do them. Can't you understand? I just want you to go, Dan. . . . If only I could have been strong to the end!"

"You are sorry you said it. You would take it back if you could —"

"Oh, Dan — how cruel men are! Of course, of course, I wish I hadn't said it! — How could I help but wish it now! I don't just wish I had not said it, I wish it were not true —"

"Nina," he drew back as if from a blow. She hid her face, repeating,

"Please go."

"I may see you again — just once — to-morrow morning — before I sail —"

She shook her head. "Not now; when you come back —"

There was always a chance that he might not come back. But he did not remind her. He was capable of that unselfishness at least, even in the supreme selfishness of love. "Then it is good-by," he said.

She did not speak, but her hand went out in his direction. He caught and held it. After a moment she drew it back. "Go —" she whispered.

She knew that he turned and left her. She heard the door close behind him, and started up at the sound, then sank back again and sat for a long time motionless, staring ahead of her. After a while she picked up the letter and re-read it.

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"When you read this I shall be at the bottom of the Sound. I went out in a canoe. They all know at the club here that I am not *esperto*. It will read as an accident. I remember your American hatred of what you call melodrama. I know now that you do not love him. I shook the truth from him before I left him. I think I killed him; it was my intention. But I heard someone coming through the woods, so I left him before I could be sure. For your sake, I did not want it known, I desired that there should be no scandal. If he should live he will never tell, for his god is public opinion. So you are safe. If he is dead, it would be impossible for me to live without bringing disgrace upon all of us. In your country they do not allow for the blood that runs warm. It is not as in mine where vindication is of the heart. Your laws are cold and hard and know no relenting. I might go to the war, you would say, with Rizzi — and fight for my country, but of what use? The bullet is ever turned aside from the aching heart. And I can no longer stand the pain of it. I am a lover, not a patriot. I do not wish to live. I know now that you do not love me in the way that I love you, and never will; that is all that matters. It is one of the mysteries. I never forget the look in your eyes when you drew back from my kiss. . . . It is true as Rudolfo says, '*Spento amore non risorge*.' I cannot win you back. My world is all dark. I cannot escape from you anywhere, yet I am farthest away when you are close beside me. You are never so far as when I hold you in my arms. Such a thing a

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man cannot stand and live, death is the only escape. If it is not Percy Loring or some other man, it is but a question of time; you are a woman who can love. *Dio*, do I not remember how you can love — and it will be one of your own race. Do you remember that proverb of the peasants: 'One should choose his wife and his cow in his own country.'

"*'Addio sognante vita.'* *Addio, Ninina mia.* After all, I can die now knowing that you have been mine only. It is something to send a man to his death for love of you when you have been his wife for eight years. I believe mine is a unique love story of Italy. Yours in death, Mario."

The letter fell from her, she buried her face in her hands. The letter, so like him, with the inevitable theatrical touch of the Latin even in expressing his final tragedy! Even in death his farewell couched in quotations from "Bohème."

Yes, she could see it clearly enough now, the swift storm of the South that had gathered in heart and brain, the hot climax, the cold reaction of despair,— the absolute hopeless despair of the child — that had closed about him with consciousness of his act; then that last terrible irretrievable step.

The thing that had seemed so impossible had come; the fear that had leapt into her mind — to be instantly dismissed as monstrous — when she had sat at the telephone receiving the news of Percy Loring's accident, was the truth. The practical heart, that she had believed

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could accommodate all its emotions to expediency, had after all become a prey to the most devastating of human passions. It had happened not infrequently before within her knowledge in Italy. But she had felt in that curious human fashion, "It cannot happen to me."

She had been too close to Mario to see; too close to his moods, his inconsequence, his illogicalities, his infidelities. She had not then after all understood him, as she thought she had. Because he lacked the tendency of her race to analyze and reason, because his habit of expression was unreserved and uncontrolled; because for all his Latin adaptability he could not understand her, as she had understood him and his people, she had felt secure in her knowledge of him.

And yet — all the time perhaps — the thing had been going on in Mario's soul that had made the tragic act possible. For in his nature, gay, mundane, pleasure-loving, there was surely no inherent tendency to suicide. . . . And Percy Loring would live —

After all, he had been her first love, the love of her youth. A flood of memories,—tender, light-hearted, childlike memories — poured over her. How gladly she would give him everything that she could give, to bring him back. . . . Alas, even now she could not give the one thing he had demanded.

She rose, and went to the window. The lights hung in glittering points over the river. She sank down on the floor, staring out, and shivered. It was so cold, that dark water, so cold — and he loved the sunshine and warmth.

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Assunta at the door looked into the unlighted room curiously.

"The contessa is alone in the dark." She touched the electric button.

"No, no; put it out," the countess commanded. "I don't want the light." The girl obeyed, wondering. "Send the Signorino Paolo to me if he is there."

"Si, contessa, the signorino is here."

The child ran into the room, then paused, feeling his way toward her. "It is all dark. Where are you, mother? Why are you alone in the dark? Is Mr. Griscom gone?"

"Yes; he is gone."

"I didn't see him. And will he come back?"

She did not answer. The child stood beside her, wondering. "And papa — he is not home yet either? When will he come?"

He reached out his hand for her cheek. "Mother —"

She caught the child in her arms and buried her face in his hair as the storm shook her. "Oh, Paolo, Paolo, my child, how can I tell you — how can I ever tell you!"

THE END



